Book 4 in the *Little Books on Buddhism* Series

Second Edition

The Little Book of Buddhist Wisdom

The Buddha's teachings on the Four Noble Truths, the three marks of existence, causality, karma, "what the teaching is not" and right understanding

by Eric K. Van Horn

The Little Book

of

Buddhist Wisdom

by Eric K. Van Horn

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Dedicated to Sāriputta,

the foremost of bhikkhu disciples

with great wisdom.

"The safe and good path to be traveled joyfully' is a term for the Noble Eight Book Path."

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Also by this author:

The Travel Guide to the Buddha's Path

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Preface

> *For the bird of enlightenment to fly, it must have two wings: the wing of wisdom and the wing of compassion.*
>
> - [Zen Buddhist adage]

In my first book, *The Travel Guide to the Buddha's Path*, I trace the entire arc of practice from establishing a daily sitting practice all the way to the first stage of awakening, which is called *stream-entry*. That was its purpose. But some people felt that this was too much ground to cover in one book. In addition there were subjects that I wanted to expand upon such as the life of the Buddha and rebirth. So I re-organized that material into eight smaller topics and am putting each one into a separate book.

One of the problems with breaking out the teachings into smaller volumes is that each book must stand on its own. I cannot assume that the reader has read the other books. This means that inevitably there is repetition and overlap.

One reason that this is unavoidable is because the Buddha's teachings are holographic. Any one teaching is a doorway to the rest of them. This is not a linear series like learning mathematics. It is more like painting, where every time that you revisit a topic like color you learn something new.

For example, *The Little Book of Buddhist Virtue* covers the topic of karma. But it is also included here as a wisdom teaching. I have made a few changes and comments in this book to reflect the different context, but most of the material is the same.

However, on the whole I do not consider this a problem. As you progress down the Buddha's path you will find that as you visit and revisit each teaching you will explore it in ever-deepening ways. It is a serious mistake to think that you have penetrated any of the teachings

completely until you have attained awakening. The Four Noble Truths, for example, have layers and layers, and you only see these layers as your practice progresses.

So while you may find yourself reading what feels like the same material, I encourage you to at least skim it and see if you don't see something new.

The teachings of the Buddha are vast and deep. There are many wonderful other sources for Buddhist teachings. I encourage you to use this series and the *Travel Guide* as a framework for further exploration. One of the beauties of the tradition is that there is always more to learn.

Eric Van Horn
Rio Rancho, New Mexico
10-July-2016
nobleeightfoldblog.com

Preface to the Second Edition

This is the second edition of *The Little Book on Buddhist Wisdom*. This book could also be called *The Little Book of Buddhist Right View* or *Right Understanding*. It is the first factor in the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Buddha recognized that what we believe conditions our actions. This is not unique to Buddhism. As I have written elsewhere, in India the word "dharma" is a general term for what you believe. Here in the West we tend to make distinctions between religion and science, theism and atheism, and so on. But in India these are all "dharmas." A dharma is both what you believe and how you act as a result of what you believe.

Think about that for a moment. If you are a white supremacist, think about how that affects what you do. Likewise if you are an evangelical Christian, an atheist, a philosophical materialist (a belief that all things are material), an orthodox Jew, and so on.

As with everything that the Buddha taught, he asked us to reflect on how what we believe affects what we think, do, and say. And as a result, sometimes it is not as important that something is literally true as it is that it helps us to be happier and more skillful.

Of course, the Buddha was not in the habit of doctoring the truth. Far from it. But his teaching is always fundamentally a training, a way for us to evolve as beings and ultimately to be free from stress and suffering.

Many people have pointed out that the factors in the Noble Eightfold Path should not be considered to be a linear progression. Each factor reinforces the others. And there is some truth to that. But there is also a method to the order of the factors. Right view, as noted, conditions how we think, speak, and act. And if our view is distorted, that will not have a beneficial outcome.

In this edition of *The Little Book on Buddhist Wisdom* there are three new

sections. The first is based on the Buddha's discourse that is subtitled "What the Teaching is Not" [DN 1]. It is the first discourse in the Canon. It seems clear that the redactors of the Pāli Canon thought that it was important to show what the Buddha did not teach. This is fundamentally a discourse on "wrong view." Some of you will recognize that there are "Buddhist" teachers who teach some of these things. This applies most notably to "annihilationism" which many "secular Buddhists" espouse.

The next new chapter is based on Sāriputta's discourse the "Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta: Right View" [MN 9]. This is perhaps the most complete exposition of right view (although even this discourse is not "complete"). Sāriputta had a unique intellect, and many of his discourses are the most detailed in the Canon.

The third change is the addition of a chapter that has the rather innocuous title "Miscellaneous Topics." There are many topics that have a lot of influence in the Buddhist world. These include emptiness, Buddha nature, non-duality, and so on. I do not discuss these topics in the rest of the book either because they are not prominent in the Buddha's own teaching or because they are not there at all.

The main reason that I take on these controversial topics is because of how they confused me when I first came to meditation. When I started I knew nothing. I was a complete blank page. In a way that is good, but it depends on what you put on that page. Garbage in-garbage out, as the saying goes. And I had a lot of trouble sorting through things I was being told, mainly because a lot of them didn't make sense. What I wrote in in this chapter is especially targeted at people who are as confused by these topics as I was. They can be a serious hindrance to your practice. They certainly were to mine.

This, then, is the new and improved version of *The Little Book of Buddhist Wisdom*. I hope that you enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it.

Eric Van Horn
Rio Rancho, New Mexico

17-May-2017

Terminology and Conventions

Because the Buddhist Canon that I use is in the Pāli language, I usually use Pāli terms. However, some Sanskrit Buddhist terms have become common in the English language and it seems rather affected not to use them. The two most obvious examples are the words "nirvāṇa," which is "nibbāna" in Pāli, and "Dharma," which is "Dhamma" in Pāli. For the most part, I use the commonly known terms. But if it seems awkward to have the Pāli terms in quotes or in certain words (like *Dhammacakkappavattana*) and use the Sanskrit terms in the main text, I use the Pāli words.

I try to avoid technical terms in the beginning of the guide until you can get used to them. However, if there are terms with which you are unfamiliar, they should be in the glossary in Appendix A.

As per APA style guidelines, book names are italicized (i.e., *Foundations of Buddhism*) and magazine articles and Internet resources are capitalized and quoted (i.e., "The Benefits of Walking Meditation").

Internet Conventions

There are many references to resources that are on the Internet. This is always a problem because hyperlinks are notoriously unreliable. Thus, I have adopted a convention of putting Internet search keywords in the text as well as a hyperlink to the resource. For example, a reference to Thich Nhat Hahn's gāthās ("poems") is "thich nhat hanh gathas here and now." If links are supported and the link is not broken, clicking on the search keywords will open that resource. If you are reading this in a context where Internet links are not supported or the link is broken, you can still find the resource by doing a search using the keywords. If you use the search keywords, the resource should be the first one in the search result list.

The other case is when an article is cited. It will look like this:

- [Sayadaw U Silananda, “The Benefits of Walking Meditation”]

Again, if your reader does not support hyperlinks or the link is broken, searching on the author's name and the article name should get you to the article. Some names and words use diacritical marks and you may have to remove them to find the correct resource. For example, for the name “Ṭhānissaro” use the non-diacritical form “Thanissaro.”

Abbreviations Used for Pāli Text References

AN: *Aṇguttara Nikāya, The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*

Bv: *Buddhavaṃsa, Chronicle of Buddhas*

BvA: *Buddhavaṃsatthakathā*, commentary to the *Buddhavaṃsa*

Cv: *Cullavagga, the "smaller book,"* the second volume in the *Khandhaka*, which is the second book of the monastic code (the Vinaya)

Dhp: *Dhammapada, The Path of Dhamma*, a collection of 423 verses

DhpA: *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*, commentary to the *Dhammapada*

DN: *Digha Nikāya, The Long Discourses of the Buddha*

Iti: *Itivuttaka, This Was Said* (by the Buddha), a.k.a., Sayings of the Buddha

Ja: *Jātaka Tales*, previous life stories of the Buddha

JaA: *Jātaka-aṭṭhakathā*, commentary on the *Jātaka Tales*

Khp: *Khuddakapāṭha, Short Passages*

MA: *Majjhima Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā*, commentary on the *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (by Buddhaghosa)

MN: *Majjhima Nikāya, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*

Mv: *Mahāvagga*, the first volume in the *Khandhaka*, which is the second book of the monastic code (the Vinaya)

Pm: *Pātimokkha, The Code of Monastic Discipline*, the first book of the monastic code (the Vinaya)

SN: *Saṃyutta Nikāya, The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*

S Nip: *Sutta Nipāta, The Sutta Collection*, literally, "suttas falling down," a sutta collection in the *Khuddaka Nikāya* consisting mostly of verse

Sv: *Sutta-vibhaṇga: Classification of the Suttas*, the "origin stories" for the Pātimokkha rules

Thag: *Theragāthā: Verses of the Elder Monks*

ThagA: *Theragāthā-aṭṭhakathā*, Commentary to the *Theragāthā*

Thig: *Therīgāthā: Verses of the Elder Nuns*

ThigA: *Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā*, Commentary to the *Therīgāthā*

Ud: *Udana, Exclamations*, the third book of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*

Vin: *Vinaya Pitaka, Basket of Discipline*, the monastic rules for monks and nuns.

1. Introduction

> *"Here, bhikkhus, some clansmen learn the Dhamma — discourses... answers to questions — and having learned the Dhamma, they examine the meaning of those teachings with wisdom. Examining the meaning of those teachings with wisdom, they gain a reflective acceptance of them. They do not learn the Dhamma for the sake of criticising others and for winning in debates, and they experience the good for the sake of which they learned the Dhamma. Those teachings, being rightly grasped by them, conduce to their welfare and happiness for a long time. Why is that? Because of the right grasp of those teachings."* - [MN 22.11]

The first three volumes in this series explore 1) establishing a daily meditation practice 2) Buddhist virtue, ethics, and morality, and 3) the life of the Buddha. But this volume explores the teachings that make Buddhism uniquely Buddhist. For people who come from a mindfulness practice or "secular Buddhism" this may be challenging.

The most fundamental teaching in all schools of Buddhism is the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths were the subject of the Buddha's first sermon. At the end of his life he also taught the Four Noble Truths, although he only gave this teaching to his monastics. Nonetheless the importance of the Four Noble Truths is clear.

However, tightly coupled with the Four Noble Truths is the Buddha's teaching on causality. Without question this is the most challenging teaching in the Buddha's Dharma. I encourage you not to do two things with this teaching. One is to think you understand it when you do not. I know someone with a Ph.D. in Buddhism who does not understand it, and he wrote his thesis on it. I know monks who have written books on

Buddhist causality and they don't understand it, either.

On the other hand it is possible to understand, and it is a particularly rich source for practice. For example, if you take just one of the 12 steps in the chain of causation, *becoming*, that can be a practice on its own. In fact that is what I encourage you to do in that chapter. But you may also find that you are drawn to some other link. One of them may jump out at you because of your temperament. This is art, not a cookbook. And my own experience with Buddhist causation is that you can keep coming back to it over many years of practice and get more and more out of it.

One of my favorite topics is *anattā*, non-self. Once again this is a very misunderstood subject in Buddhism. Some years ago I went to a talk by a Tibetan Lama and someone asked him to explain non-self. In brief what he said is that a) it is very complicated and b) you will get a different answer to that question depending on whom you ask. That is quite a non-answer. I am sure it did not help the poor person who asked the question. And certainly, while this is a subtle topic, you can understand it, and I hope that I explain it in a way that will make it clear.

There is also a great deal of confusion about "dukkha," "suffering" or "stress." The Buddha never said that life is suffering, so lets get that out of the way right here. What he did say is that in the unawakened mind there is stress, and to free yourself from that stress it must be understood. Part of the process of meditation is learning how to look at that stress and to see how we create it so that we can stop doing that.

And then there is karma, which I also included in the book on Buddhist virtue. It is the key to all the Buddha's teachings, and most simply states that our actions have consequences. That is a good thing because otherwise we could not change, and we would be powerless over our futures. The law of karma states that our future is in our hands, and the training makes us more skillful so we can craft that future in a meaningful way.

These, then, are the wisdom teachings of the Buddha. They are important

because they are the map. You can meditate and meditate and meditate, but without the map you would never get anywhere. Thich Nhat Hanh calls this “wasting time on the cushion.” Establishing a daily meditation practice is like learning how to drive. Penetrating the wisdom teachings is having a place to go.

2. What the Buddha Taught

Before we discuss the wisdom teachings of the Buddha, it is worth examining how we know what he taught.

We have several sources for the Buddha's teachings that date to his time. There are two different versions of the Buddhist Canon in Chinese called the *Āgamas*. There is a partial version of the Canon in Tibetan, and a few discourses preserved in Sanskrit. However, the version of the Canon that is the most complete and the only one that is translated into English is the Pāli Canon. Pāli is a language that is similar to Sanskrit. Sanskrit was the language of the educated and the elite in ancient India, and Pāli is its simplified version, something akin to the relationship between Latin and Italian.

This is not to denigrate the *Āgamas*. The Chinese were wonderful scholars and wonderful translators. Some of those translations are sure to prove superior to the Pāli. However, at present we do not have translations of the *Āgamas* in English, so only those who know both Chinese and Pāli can make those comparisons.

The Pāli Canon is usually associated with the "Theravada" ("doctrine of the elders") tradition, also commonly called the "southern tradition" of Buddhism. There is also the "eastern tradition" (Chinese) – the Mahāyāna – which includes Zen Buddhism. And finally there is the "northern tradition" (mainly Tibetan), the Vajrayāna, also called "Tantric Buddhism." However, associating the Pāli Canon with the Theravada is a misunderstanding of how the different schools of Buddhism evolved, and the role of the earliest canonical literature in later Buddhist developments. Modern scholarship puts the death of the Buddha at about 400 B.C.E. Until about 150-100 B.C.E there was only one canonical literature. Tradition holds that about 6 months after the Buddha died, the existing arahants (fully awakened beings) met and held the first Buddhist council. This was to codify the discourses given by the Buddha and his

most senior disciples.

At around 150-100 B.C.E some monks composed new discourses. This continued for the next 400-500 years. These would eventually make up the Mahāyāna tradition of Buddhism. Monks and nuns who believed that only the original discourses were the word of the Buddha would later become the Theravada tradition. Those who believed that both sets of discourses were the word of the Buddha would later form the Mahāyāna tradition. However, in India in the first millennium monks and nuns of both schools studied and lived together in the same monasteries. Thus the distinction between the two was not sharply divided.

Tantric Buddhism – what is here being called northern Buddhism – grew out of the Mahāyāna tradition. It started about 1,000 years after the Buddha. It, too, brought the original discourses along with the newer Mahāyāna discourses. However, by the time Tantric Buddhism made it to Tibet they only had a portion of the Canon. The original discourses exist today as the *Kanjur* (*Translated Word of the Buddha*) and the *Tenjur* (*Translated Treatises*). [Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*]

The important point here is that all traditions and schools of Buddhism accepted the early canonical literature as part of the teachings. They saw the later developments as a further refinement of the Buddha's teachings, not a way to replace them.

Let me also share a personal anecdote. When I first started to meditate it was in a Zen practice. They emphasized the *Shobogenzo*, Master Dogen's masterwork. And it is, to be sure, a remarkable piece of work. However, at that time it did not make any sense to me at all.

Many years later, after having read a good portion of the Pāli Canon, I went back to the *Shobogenzo*. I felt like I was reading a commentary on everything that I had read in the Canon. It all made sense, but it would never have made sense to me if I had not read the Canon.

The Pāli Canon was first translated into English in the 19th century by

the Pāli Text Society (PTS) in editions that are still available, although they often contain quaint Victorian language that is a little hard to follow. (They also, rather amusingly, leave out racier sections that would have offended Victorian sensibilities.) More recently we have the translations of Bhikkhu Bodhi (the *Majjhima Nikāya* jointly with his mentor Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, the *Aṇguttara Nikāya*) and Maurice Walsh (the *Digha Nikāya*). We also have a partial translation of the Canon by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. Ṭhānissaro's translations are available for free on the Internet as eBooks and as print books. (The print versions are available by request from Metta Forest Monastery in California.) It is very useful to compare different translations.

The German monk Ajahn Anālayo is working on translating the *Āgamas* into English. The *Āgamas* are translations of Sanskrit originals. As Buddhism became more widespread in India, the discourses were translated into Sanskrit (from Pāli, or perhaps the local dialect, "old Magadhi"), and as Buddhism moved into China these were translated into Chinese. While Sanskrit and Pāli are very closely related, it is still remarkable how similar the Chinese versions are to the Pāli ones. Very few Sanskrit originals exist. As the Muslims moved into India at the end of the first millennium they were particularly harsh on the Buddhists, destroying the great Buddhist universities, temples, and libraries.

The Oral Tradition

Considering the time that has passed since the life of the Buddha and the great distances that the Buddhist Canon traveled, it is remarkable how coherent it is, and how similar these different collections are. While there are variations, the meaning remains fundamentally the same.

The main differences tend to be in the order of events. Ajahn Anālayo notes that this is consistent with how human memory works. Buddhism is an oral tradition. Monks and nuns memorized the works, starting with when they were given by the Buddha and his disciples. Human memory tends to remember the sense of a thing, but doesn't always get the details

right. Getting things out of order is very common, and that is consistent with the types of discrepancies you see in the Pāli version of a discourse compared to its Chinese equivalent.

(For an example of comparing different versions of a discourse, see Ajahn Anālayo's book *Perspectives on Satipaṭṭhāna*.)

Also, in Buddhism it was the meaning of a discourse that was the most important thing, not its literal transmission. In Hinduism they are more concerned with the literal translation. Thus, in Hinduism priests begin to memorize the literature at an age no greater than 12, while in Buddhism memorization did not begin until a monk or nun could understand its meaning.

One thing that is hard for Westerners to grasp is how efficient the system of memorization is in India, a tradition that exists to this day. I experienced this first hand when I was there. I was walking around Bodh Gaya with a 12-year-old boy who adopted me. He was from the village of Uruvela, where a girl named "Sujātā" is credited with nursing the Buddha back to health prior to his enlightenment. Her stupa is still in the village. I asked the boy if he knew the story of Sujātā, whereupon he recited the entire story verbatim. In typically Indian fashion, to know something is to have memorized it.

In the West there is not much emphasis on the ability to memorize. However this skill can quickly be developed. In his book *Jewish Meditation*, Aryeh Kaplan tells a story about being in rabbinical school when he and some friends decided to memorize portions of the *Talmud*:

> *…when I was in yeshivah, a few friends and I decided to have a contest to see who could memorize the most pages of the Talmud. For me, it was an interesting experience. The first page took considerable effort and time, perhaps several hours. As I continued, each page became progressively easier. Eventually, after ten pages or so, I found that I could memorize a page after three or*

> *four readings. By the time I had gone through some twenty pages, I could memorize a page with a single reading. What had originally been extremely difficult had become relatively easy. My friends reported the same experience.*
>
> - [Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation*]

Further, in cultures with oral traditions certain linguistic mechanisms are used to make it easier to memorize. The technical term for this is "oral-formulaic composition." Stock phrases and meters express the same ideas in different contexts. Anyone who has read the Pāli Canon quickly gets used to this. This is not unique to India. Medieval Irish, Celts, and Anglo-Saxons spontaneously composed poetry in this way. In more modern times Allen Ginsberg also composed poetry in this way. Thus, in cultures with oral traditions, there is a "language technology" that facilitates both composition and memorization.

There was a further development in Buddhism and that was the role of the bhanaka ("reciters"). The Pāli Canon is quite large. The PTS edition is 55 volumes. Bhikkhu Bodhi's English translation of the *Majjhima Nikāya* is over 1100 pages. The *Saṃyutta Nikāya* is twice as long. So to make the preservation of the texts easier, some monks (mainly it was monks) specialized in preserving one collection. These were called "bhanakas." A monk who specialized in the *Digha Nikāya* is a "Dighabhanaka," a monk who specialized in the *Majjhima Nikāya* is a "Majjhimabhanaka," and so forth. Some monks were able to memorize the entire Canon. Reputedly there are four or five monks in the world today who have done so. However this is very rare, and usually the collections were divided up for preservation.

In the West we tend to not trust oral transmission, but in India it is just the opposite. Because they memorize the texts in a group and the testing standards are quite strict, they believe that this is the most accurate way to transmit texts. They believe that written transmission is too subject to transcription errors. So we have two cultures that developed very

differently in this way.

Another test of the Buddhist Canon is its consistency. There are some scholars who argue that there is little to suggest that these are the teachings of the Buddha himself. But most scholars say that the teachings are so coherent and cogent that they can only be the work of a single, genius mind.

But more importantly, when you turn the discourses of the Buddha into an ardent and diligent way of life the truth of the Buddha's teachings shines through. It is a system of great breadth and great depth. One of the problems with the Buddha's teaching is that many people have tried to simplify them, or perhaps more properly, to over-simplify them. The Buddha himself, after attaining awakening, was dubious that anyone else would understand what he discovered:

> *"I considered: 'This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. But this generation delights in worldliness, takes delight in worldliness, rejoices in worldliness. It is hard for such a generation to see this truth, namely, specific conditionality, dependent origination. And it is hard to see this truth, namely, the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbāna. If I were to teach the Dhamma, others would not understand me, and that would be wearying and troublesome for me.'"* - [MN 26.19]

This path requires understanding - which is what we are about to study - ethical and moral conduct, and skill in meditation, in developing the mind.

Fortunately for us, the Buddha decided to teach what he discovered, and

a way of training so that we can realize it for ourselves.

The Organization of the Pāli Canon

In the original version of the Canon, there were two sets of texts. These were the Vinaya Piṭaka (piṭaka = "basket") and the Sutta Piṭaka. The Vinaya Piṭaka is the monastic code, the rules of conduct for the monks and nuns. The Sutta Piṭaka is the collection of discourses.

(The word "sutta" is a Pāli word that means "discourse." In Sanskrit the word is "sutra." Sanskrit and Pāli are Indo-European languages, so many words in Sanskrit and Pāli have similar sounding words in English. The word "sutra" is related to the English word "suture," meaning "to stitch together.")

In the Pāli Canon, the suttas are divided into five "nikāyas" (collections). The fifth book, the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, has either 15 or 18 smaller texts depending on the version of the Canon:

1. ***Digha Nikāya*** - the long discourses
2. ***Majjhima Nikāya*** - the middle length discourses
3. ***Saṃyutta Nikāya*** - the connected discourses
4. ***Aṇguttara Nikāya*** - the numerical discourses
5. ***Khuddaka Nikāya*** - the collection of little texts
    1. ***Khuddakapāṭha*** - "short passages"
    2. ***Dhammapada*** - collection of sayings of the Buddha
    3. ***Udana*** - "inspired utterances"
    4. ***Itivuttaka*** - "the Buddha's sayings"
    5. ***Sutta Nipāta*** - literally "suttas falling down," a collection of 71 short suttas
    6. ***Vimanavatthu*** - stories about the life and deeds of people who attained residence in a heavenly mansion, the "Vimana," due to meritorious deeds.
    7. ***Petavatthu*** - narratives describing how the effects of bad acts can lead to an unhappy rebirth
    8. ***Theragāthā*** - verses of the elder monks

9. ***Therigathā*** - verses of the elder nuns
10. ***Jataka*** - stories of previous lives of the Buddha
11. ***Niddesa*** - commentary on the Sutta Nipāta, ascribed to the Buddha's chief disciple Sāriputta
12. ***Patisambhidamagga*** - "the path of discrimination," also ascribed to Sāriputta
13. ***Apadāna*** - "biographical stories" of monks and nuns
14. ***Buddhavaṃsa*** - a hagiographical text which describes the life of the Buddha and of the twenty-four previous Buddhas
15. ***Cariyāpiṭaka*** - "proper conduct," accounts of the Buddha's former lives when he as a bodhisattva exhibited behaviors known as "perfections," prerequisites to buddhahood
16. ***Nettippakarana*** - "the guide," practice methods taught by the Buddha's disciple Kaccana, included only in the Burmese Canon
17. ***Petakopadesa*** - "piṭaka disclosure," also attributed to Kaccana and also only in the Burmese Canon
18. ***Milindapañha*** - "Questions of Milinda," a dialogue between the Indo-Greek king Menander I (Pāli: Milinda) of Bactria, and the Buddhist sage Nāgasena. Burmese only.

(Note that the Āgamas are organized differently.)

3. The Four Noble Truths

An American Dharma teacher once asked the Dalai Lama, “With all of the Buddhist traditions in the West, how can we find common ground so that we can exist together?” The Dalai Lama replied that we should concentrate on the Four Noble Truths because that is the one teaching of Buddhism that all of the traditions share.

On the night of his awakening the Buddha had three great insights. The first was that he had been born and reborn throughout beginningless time. The second was that beings are born and reborn according to their karma. And the third insight was into the Four Noble Truths:

1. The First Noble Truth is the Noble Truth of “dukkha.” “Dukkha” is usually translated as “suffering” or “stress.”
2. The Second Noble Truth is the Noble Truth of the cause of dukkha, which is craving. The Pāli word for craving also means “thirsting.” Our senses are constantly feeding, and this is the root of our existential dilemma.
3. The Third Noble Truth is the good news, and that is the end of dukkha. It is possible to free ourselves from dukkha and the endless rounds of birth, death, and rebirth.
4. The Fourth Noble Truth is the path that leads to the end of dukkha. This is the Noble Eightfold Path: right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

In medical terms the Four Noble Truths 1) diagnose our illness, 2) identify the cause of the illness, 3) set the treatment goal, and 4) prescribe the treatment plan. The medical model is a traditional one in Buddhism. It is why a common metaphor for the Buddha is as a physician.

After his awakening the Buddha spent the next seven weeks absorbing what he had experienced. He then set off to find his five former

companions, samaṇas who had been doing the same ascetic practices that he had been doing. He gave his first sermon to them. This is the "Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Dharma." [SN 56.11] This is the discourse in which he taught the Four Noble Truths.

The Buddha gave his first sermon at the Deer Park in Sarnath, India. Ever since then, deer have had a special meaning in Buddhism. You often see two reclining deer at the top of the entrances to Buddhist monasteries.

Figure: Deer and the Wheel of the Dharma

The site of the Buddha's first discourse was later commemorated by building the Dhamekh Stupa there. "Stupa" literally means "heap." It is a mound or structure that contains relics. You can visit it today. It is one of the places that the Buddha recommended that devout pilgrims visit during their lifetimes.

Figure: The Damekh Stupa

Nearby there is a Buddhist monastery, the Mulagandhakuti Vihara. And every evening, monks and lay pilgrims chant the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. There is a very nice rendering of this sutta being chanted in Pāli on the Abhayagiri Monastery web site. (Internet search: "dhammacakkappavattana audio abhayagiri")

Figure: the Mulagandhakuti Vihara

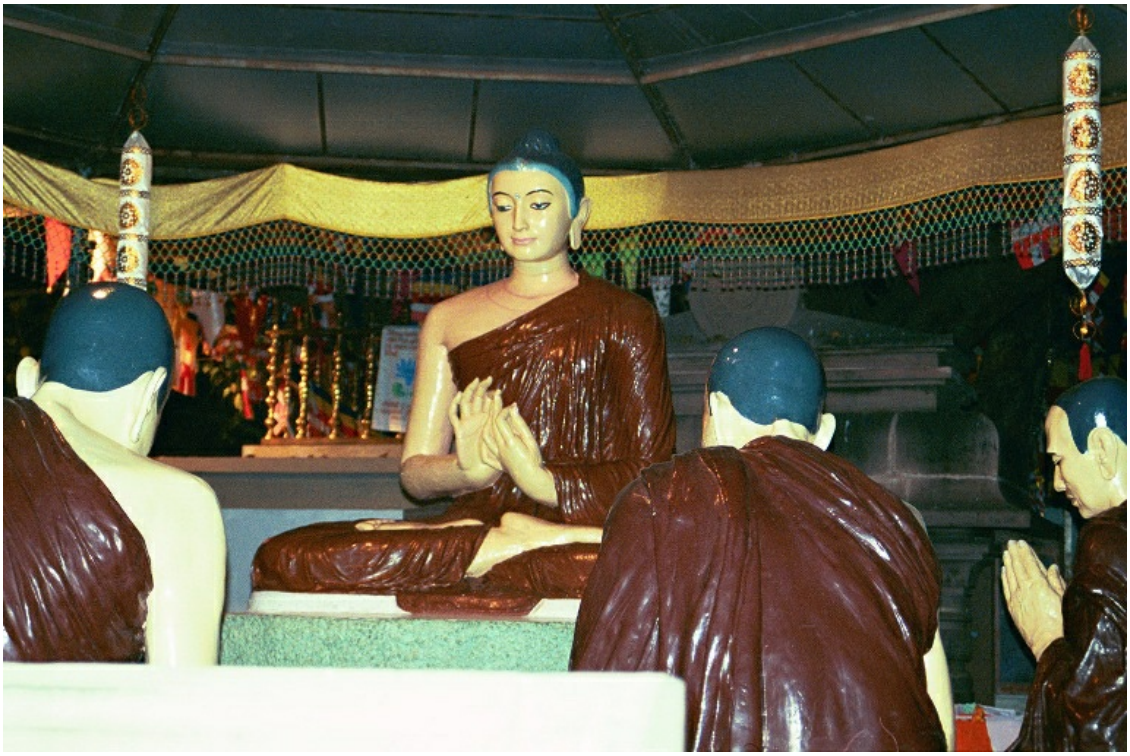

Figure: Statue outside the Mulagandhakuti Vihara commemorating the Buddha's first discourse

The hand position of the Buddha in this photograph is the “teaching mudra.” The significance of the thumb touching the first finger is that he is teaching the first noble truth. You will see statues of the Buddha with this mudra, but he will be touching a different finger. The number of the finger indicates which noble truth he is teaching, one through four.

Another interesting fact about this sutta concerns its name. You may be wondering, well, if the sutta is about the Four Noble Truths, why is it called “The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Dhamma”?

For this discussion, we need to look at a bit of Indian lore. In ancient India there was the notion of a “wheel turning monarch.” The wheel motif comes from the wheels of a chariot. A wheel turning monarch - “chakravarti” in Sanskrit, “cakkavatti” in Pāli - is a “universal ruler,” one “whose chariot rolls everywhere without obstruction.” This literally means that no one else's army can keep him from going where he wants. But the most important attribute of a chakravarti is that he is just, moral, ethical, and benevolent. The wheel turns as long as the monarch is in power. Buddhism adopted this symbolism. When a Buddha becomes enlightened and “then transmits the teachings to a disciple” he is said to have set the Wheel of the Dhamma in motion. As long as the teachings are transmitted, the wheel continues to turn.

The Four Noble Truths act as a framework for all the teachings of the Buddha. The Four Noble Truths do not describe any person, a self, or any gods. They describe a process. This is the process whereby we create stress and suffering for ourselves. They also describe the process whereby one escapes from these unskillful behaviors. The Buddhist law of causality, dependent co-arising, describes the process of creating stress and suffering and how to end it.

Also implicit in the Four Noble Truths are the lack of a self or a soul. There is only this process. The importance of virtue is also embodied here because part of the path of liberation is the cultivation of altruism, morality, and ethical conduct. We also see The Three Characteristics of conditioned existence: dukkha, non-self, and impermanence.

And when you realize the Third Noble Truth, the Noble Truth of cessation, you open up to transcendent wisdom and understanding. You experience nirvāṇa, the unconditioned realm that is beyond time and space.

The First Noble Truth

> *"Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering."* - [SN 56.11]

The Pāli word translated here as "suffering" is "dukkha." "Suffering" is the most common word used in English translations. Unfortunately, "suffering" does not capture the layers and flavors of the word "dukkha." As a result, many people prefer to leave the word untranslated.

The Buddha himself never defined dukkha. Rather, as he did here, he gave lists of things that are dukkha. Some people say that the Buddha taught that life is suffering, but he never said that. He simply provided us with an inventory of examples.

The word "dukkha" is also translated as "unsatisfactoriness" and "stress." "Suffering" is the most pointed and the one with the hardest edge. But dukkha can also mean that in the midst of pleasant experience there is a kind of unsatisfactoriness. All of our experience is conditioned, and when those conditions go away then the pleasant experience is not there, either. This is the nature of our conditioned existence. It is inconstant and unreliable. And as the Buddha said here, when we have something we don't want, we suffer, and when we don't have what we want we suffer, and this is how we spend a great deal of our lives.

Of course, we do not create all of our stress and suffering. If you break an arm you do not create the pain. But the process of meditation reveals what the mind does even with those physical sensations. I am sure that you know some people who have unpleasant experiences and they never overreact. And other people take even the slightest unpleasantness and turn it into a catastrophe. It is this pain and suffering that we create in the mind, and it is this pain and suffering that we can eliminate. The Buddha used a simile to describe this process:

> *"Bhikkhus, when the uninstructed worldling is being contacted by a painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves, and laments; he weeps beating his breast and becomes distraught. He feels two feelings — a bodily one and a mental one. Suppose they were to strike a man with an arrow, and then they would strike him immediately afterwards with a second arrow, so that the man would feel a feeling caused by two arrows. So too, when the uninstructed worldling is being contacted by a painful feeling ... he feels two feelings — a bodily one and a mental one.*
>
> *...*
>
> *"Bhikkhus, when the instructed noble disciple is contacted by a painful feeling, he does not sorrow, grieve, or lament; he does not weep beating his breast and become distraught. He feels one feeling — a bodily one, not a mental one. Suppose they were to strike a man with an arrow, but they would not strike him immediately afterwards with a second arrow, so that the man would feel a feeling caused by one arrow only. So too, when the instructed noble disciple is contacted by a painful feeling ... he feels one feeling — a bodily one, not a mental one."*
> - [SN 36.6]

Seeing into the nature of pain is one of the richer and more interesting

topics in meditation. There is the physical sensation. But you can learn to look deeply into what those sensations are like and what the mind does with them. This is the "second arrow," the one that we create in our minds. It is how we amplify unpleasant experiences. And we can learn how to eliminate the second arrow.

We also take human interactions and spin them out of control in the same way. Something unpleasant happens and we obsess on it. Before you know it we take the simplest transgression and turn it into a calamity. This does not solve the problem or make us happy.

One of the aims of the Buddha's training is to see how we create stress and suffering for ourselves. As the Buddha said, dukkha should be understood:

> *"Suffering should be understood; the source and origin of suffering should be understood; the diversity of suffering should be understood; the result of suffering should be understood; the cessation of suffering should be understood; the way leading to the cessation of suffering should be understood."* - [AN 6.63]

You can see in the Buddha's statement that dukkha is not simply a statement of fact, a reality that we have to endure. There are activities associated with dukkha and the First Noble Truth in the training. We must understand dukkha. We must look at it and see how it works.

But it is also important to emphasize that looking at and understanding dukkha must rest upon a meditational foundation of well-being. The first stage in meditation is to establish this sense of well-being. Then if looking at dukkha becomes too difficult you can return to the pleasantness of the breath. You ease your way into the ability to look at dukkha.

The Second Noble Truth

> *“Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: it is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination.”* - [SN 56.11]

Our normal way of living is to seek pleasure. We crave. We become bandied about by our addictions, large and small. We feed on sense pleasures. And when we are not feeding on sense pleasures the mind starts frantically looking for something on which to feed.

I knew someone who had a wait cursor on his computer that was a scanning searchlight, like the light in a lighthouse. That is our bored mind, scanning and searching for something on which to feed.

The other side of craving is “aversion.” With unpleasant experience we don't want it so we push it away. So in addition to the unpleasantness of the experience we increase the unpleasant experience by adding our reaction to it. This is the second arrow.

We spend most of our existence going back and forth between craving and aversion, and if nothing else it's exhausting. This is why translating “dukkha” as “stress” is so fitting. “Stress” correctly identifies the direct experience of dukkha. We are constantly getting pushed and pulled by craving and aversion, and sometimes we are just confused. This confusion is also dukkha.

The Buddha described three types of craving. The first is the obvious one, craving for sense pleasure. He also added craving for existence and non-existence. Craving for existence is common in most people. We don't want to die, and if we do die we want to end up somewhere nice. Craving for non-existence is the desire for annihilation. This is what happens to people who are suicidal. These types of craving define our existential dilemma.

As long as our mind is frantically searching for stimulation it can never be at peace.

An important point here is that when the Buddha talked about craving or desire, he was talking about sense desire, craving for existence, or craving for non-existence. He described these more generally as "worldly desire." Do not confuse this with desire to cultivate the path. There are skillful desires, and they relate to cultivating the path. Without those desires you cannot progress.

There is another particularly curious aspect to craving, and that is how we crave suffering. If we think of ourselves as victims it gives us a sense of identity. Without the suffering we would not know who we are:

> *One of the Buddha's essential insights was that the suffering that really weighs down the mind is a suffering we create — and it's unnecessary. Even though we create it and we suffer from it, we cling to it. This has some unexpected implications. One is that for a lot of us, if we didn't suffer, we would be lost. Even the simple idea of not suffering would leave us hanging. This is because our strongest sense of who we are often comes from being treated unjustly. We define ourselves through the suffering that comes from being treated unjustly. If we were to deny ourselves that perverse pleasure, we'd feel lost. But when other people treat us unjustly, we start treating ourselves unjustly. When other people criticize us unfairly, we start criticizing ourselves unfairly. We suffer from all of this, but we would feel lost without the sense of self provided by that unfairness. The mind can be really perverse.*
>
> - [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "Seeing With the Body"]

I am sure that you know people who are never happy unless they are

miserable. It is the sense of self provided by the feeling of victimization that does it. But while some people are extreme cases most of us do this from time to time.

> *To work around this problem, the Buddha has us focus simply on the problem of suffering without asking who's causing this, or who you are, or what you have to do to your sense of self to make it better. He says, "Just look at the suffering in and of itself." That's important: the "in and of itself." That helps get you out of the entanglements that come from 'your' clinging to 'your' suffering. When you can look at these things as events simply on their own terms, simply as a pattern of cause and effect without asking how 'you're' involved in it, when you can simply see the fact of suffering as it's being caused, then you see the connection to its cause. You realize that you don't have to engage in the cause. That helps loosen up your attachment to the suffering.*
>
> - [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "Seeing With the Body"]

The Third Noble Truth

> *"Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonreliance on it."* - [SN 56.11]

The Third Noble Truth is the Good News.

"Cessation" here means "the cessation of craving" and with it the cessation of dukkha. The causal chain that perpetuates our suffering is broken. One who is fully awakened does not feed the chain of causation.

This is because ignorance, which is at the root of the chain, is cut off. The ignorance is replaced by direct, clear knowing.

Some people worry that cessation means that if they awaken they will cease to exist. Misunderstandings about non-self feed that. But what ceases is the dukkha. More specifically it is the subtle intention that causes us to fabricate our unskillful actions that ceases. When you cease this unskillful fabrication you are free from dukkha.

The Fourth Noble Truth

> *"Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: it is this Noble Eightfold Path; that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."* - [SN 56.11]

This is the Noble Eightfold Path. This is the training that we must follow to be free from dukkha.

There is both a linear and a non-linear aspect to the Noble Eightfold Path. Most people begin the practice at the end with right mindfulness and right concentration. However, it took a certain amount of wisdom for you to become interested in meditation, and that is at the beginning, in right view. This can also be called "wisdom" or "right intention." We wanted to do something good.

And as we progress on the path at times we will focus mainly on one aspect of the path or another. Right now we are focusing on right view. But each aspect of the path re-enforces every other aspect. Nonetheless, there is also a meaning to the order in which the Buddha presented the path.

If your practice is not grounded in a correct understanding of right view it is easy to get lost. This is the purpose of studying and understanding right view. It is easy to misunderstand meditative experiences. This is

what happened to the Buddha on his journey. His first two teachers thought they had found final liberation. They did not see the whole picture.

It is also worth mentioning what "right" means. A lot of people have trouble with that word. "Right" is not a value judgment, as in "I'm right and you're wrong." This is how religions go to war with each other. We certainly don't need any more of that.

Here is a way to understand the use of "right" in this context. When I was a teenager I really got into working on my car. It was the 1960's, and there was a famous book about fixing Volkswagens called *How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive: A Manual of Step-by-Step Procedures for the Compleat Idiot*. I mean, this book is a classic. I can't believe that it is still in print. Not only is it still in print, it is a best seller. It was written by a legendary guy named John Muir, who was descended from the naturalist. John Muir brought more joy to more backyard mechanics than anyone else in history. Sadly he died prematurely at the age of 59 of a brain tumor, but he left behind quite a legacy.

Once I had a bad CV ("constant velocity") joint. If you don't know what that is, don't worry about it. Hardly anybody does. But it was a tough job: greasy, knuckle scrapping, hard work. The CV joint, as I recall had 5 or 6 studs that had to be lined up on the axle, and while you squeezed underneath your VW, you had to get everything lined up just right to get the CV joint on.

That is the meaning of "right" in this situation. It fits properly. Everything lines up.

There is a sense of balance. You are neither too far to one extreme or the other. Balance is a big issue in meditation. That is why we constantly evaluate the breath. Are we too sleepy? We need more energy. Are we too restless? We need to calm down. We need to hit the mark precisely or the CV joint won't go on.

Right View

> *"And what is right view? Knowledge with regard to suffering, knowledge with regard to the origination of suffering, knowledge with regard to the cessation of suffering, knowledge with regard to the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering. This is called right view."* - [DN 22]

The first two path factors are the "wisdom division" of the path. They include:

1. **The Four Noble Truths**, which is what we are discussing here.
2. **Virtue** (ethics/morality), also known as "the wholesome and the unwholesome."
3. **Causality**, the Buddha's teachings on cause and effect, to wit, that we live in a universe of causes and conditions.
4. **Karma**, i.e., that we inherit the consequences of our actions.
5. **The Three Marks of Existence**, i.e., that all conditioned things are impermanent, do not have a permanent essence, and ultimately are unsatisfying. Note that the only thing that is unconditioned is Nirvāṇa.

These are the wisdom teachings of the Buddha, and we will discuss each one of them in turn.

(To be sure, there are others. We will, in fact, later discuss the Buddha's first discourse, which is on wrong views, and we will look at Sāriputta's extraordinary discourse on right view. And if you want to delve more deeply into the wisdom teachings, I encourage you to read Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu's book *The Wings to Awakening*. This is a journey of a thousand miles.)

Many years ago in my job as a software engineer the first Macintosh computer came out and I had to learn how to program it. Everything was so different from anything we had ever done before. That included the

technical documentation. That Macintosh came with an early edition of the documentation called *Inside Macintosh*. Apple did not even have time to do a proper printing of it so they printed what was fondly known as "the phonebook edition" of *Inside Macintosh*. It literally looked like the Manhattan phonebook.

Inside Macintosh was about 1000 pages. No one had ever seen technical documentation that long. It was quite overwhelming. And the inside joke among computer programmers was that to understand any one chapter you had to understand all the rest.

The Buddha's teachings are a little like that. You have to work your way through them iteratively, visiting and revisiting each topic. They are like pieces of a puzzle. So you just have to work with each piece as best you can, and if you keep at it, eventually you will see the big picture.)

Right Intention

> *"And what is right intention? Being intent on renunciation, on freedom from ill-will, on harmlessness. This is called right intention."* - [SN 45.8]

The Buddha was incredibly adept at taking concepts and notions that were well-known in India at that time and turning them a few degrees to the left or right to give them a new, different, and deeper meaning. It is one of the fun aspects of studying the discourses, to see his nuanced use of language.

He applied one of those twists to karma. Now the word "karma" literally means "action." The implication is that if we are skillful in our actions we will have a wholesome result now or in the future. And there is some truth to that.

But the Buddha put the emphasis on the intentions behind the actions:

> *"It is intention, bhikkhus, that I call kamma. For having*

intended, one acts by body, speech, or mind." - [AN 6.63]

There is an intention behind everything we do. The issue is how skillful is that intention? We have a lot of intentions that are there for nefarious, unskillful reasons. But usually we act without awareness, without knowledge or skill, without even being consciously aware of what we are doing or why. We are controlled by impulse.

Larry Rosenberg says that our thoughts and emotions are like little Nazis controlling our actions. We give them such great power, and in doing so we give up any real control we have over our lives. We think that our thoughts are "ours" but really our thoughts are more akin to the tail wagging the dog. As the saying goes, "Don't believe everything you think."

Usually we act out of habit. Given the same situation, we will react the same way nine times out of ten. It may even be ten out of ten. And every time that we react in the same way in the same circumstances we reinforce that habit. In other words, we make it worse, and acting in a different, more thoughtful and skillful way is less likely.

Part of what we are trying to cultivate is attention to what we are doing and why. What motivates us? Is it something wholesome, like generosity, kindness, good will, compassion, love, and wisdom? Or is it something else, something that gets us into trouble and causes the poor people around us all kinds of mischief?

In the West we say that "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." And there is some truth to that. If you give a homeless alcoholic money that is not very skillful. Their next stop is probably a liquor store. But there is a difference between good intentions and skillful intentions. If you give that homeless person a sandwich or some clothes that is a skillful intention. And if you can get him to ordain as a monk, you are really cooking. There are different kinds of homelessness. There is the crushing failure of the streets and the liberating freedom of the monastery.

Habits are not inherently a bad thing. Bad habits are. One of the things that we are trying to do is to cultivate skillful habits. Good habits are self-reinforcing. Good habits make us happier. Being generous makes us happy, being loving makes us happy, being wise makes us happy. We just are not normally tuned into that kind of happiness. So one of the things we are working on is to twist that dial so we get a clean, clear signal, a signal that brings us in harmony with the world around us.

Here is a useful exercise to try sometime. Someone is making a point, perhaps about a relationship problem or political problem. And they seem to be making a good argument. But there is something about the argument that is unsettling. You can usually determine the wisdom of the argument by looking at the motivation behind it. Is it motivated by fear, anger, aversion, greed, or ignorance? Or is it motivated by wisdom, compassion, generosity, or kindness?

Right Speech

> *"And what is right speech? Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, and from idle chatter. This is called right speech."* - [SN 45.8]

The next three path factors are the "virtue division" (ethics and morality) of the path. The word "morality" can conjure up a pretty negative response. When my son was in college he took a class on ethics and morality. I was excited about that because of what I had learned from Buddhism about ethics.

Unfortunately his teacher taught ethics and morality in a mind-numbingly depressing way. His view was that ethics and morality are something that we have to do but that they are burdensome. They are a cross that we have to bear.

The Buddha's teachings could not be more different. Think of a time in your life when you lied about something. How did that make you feel? Being deceitful does not bring you joy and happiness. Speaking

abusively, or talking behind someone's back, or gossiping does not make you feel very good, either. So the Buddha's teaching on ethics is to be aware of the effects of our actions on the mind. And speaking in a way that is skillful and wise will make you infinitely happier and more at peace with yourself than speaking in a way that causes harm.

We probably cause more problems with speech than with anything else we do. Whoever made up that saying about "sticks and stones" was completely off the mark. Countries go to war because of unskillful speech. Marriages break up. Fights start. People can be terribly hurt by unskillful speech. I am pretty sure that someone has said something to you that has been extremely painful. I am also guessing that you have said something that hurt someone else. I know I have.

Of all the Buddha's teachings on ethics and morality, the ones on speech are - I think - the hardest to master. We are so used to having words fly out of our mouths without any thought or care. Some years ago I was in a Zen saṇgha, and one week our teacher told us to pick one precept on which to work especially diligently. Everyone in the group but one chose speech, just because it is so hard.

There are four different types of wrong speech in Buddhism:

1. **Being deceitful** - This does not just mean "not lying." People can say something that is factually true but it can still be deceitful. It can also have no benefit, and cause harm.
2. **Speaking harshly or abusively** - This type of speech is intended to hurt someone.
3. **Speaking in a way that "causes discord in the community**" - This would include spreading ill will, talking behind someone's back, etc. Fox News is a monument to this type of wrong speech.
4. **"Idle" speech** - This is gossip, talking without any positive purpose or intent.

This does not mean that you have to sugar coat everything you say. The Buddha was from the warrior class and he was not shy about

reprimanding misbehaving monks. The difference is that he did it without malice or ill will. He did it out of compassion, right intention. That is a very tricky thing, to be able to do that. It is useful to think about our speech as having some positive result, now or in the future, not necessarily that it is pleasant.

Inevitably the question comes up - something like - suppose you are hiding Jews from the Nazis, and they ask, “Are there any Jews in the attic?”

The answer is that in time and with increased awareness you can learn how to respond in a skillful way that does not involve lying. You could say, “I have done nothing that would bring shame to this family.” You could say, “I am an honest and law-abiding citizen.” There are many things you could say that would not be lying. You speak in a way that is skillful, and compassionate, and kind.

To be sure, we will work on something like right speech and we will be off the mark sometimes, maybe most of the time. But remember, that is why we call these “practices.” We work on them. These skills develop over time. When you start, it is like learning archery. You don't even know how to hold the bow. Then you know how to hold the bow, but you can't hit the target. Then you can hit the target, but your shots are all over the place. Finally, with time and effort and practice, you can hit the bulls-eye every time.

Right Action

> *“And how is one made pure in three ways by bodily action? There is the case where a certain person, abandoning the taking of life, abstains from the taking of life. He dwells with his rod laid down, his knife laid down, scrupulous, merciful, compassionate for the welfare of all living beings. Abandoning the taking of what is not given, he abstains from taking what is not given. He does not*

take, in the manner of a thief, things in a village or a wilderness that belong to others and have not been given by them. Abandoning sensual misconduct, he abstains from sensual misconduct. He does not get sexually involved with those who are protected by their mothers, their fathers, their brothers, their sisters, their relatives, or their Dhamma; those with husbands, those who entail punishments, or even those crowned with flowers by another man. This is how one is made pure in three ways by bodily action." - [AN 10.176]

There are three types of wrong action listed here. The first is "the taking of life." The canonical definition of killing extends to living beings that have "breath and consciousness." This includes people and all animal life, including insects, but not plant life. The Pāli word for "killing" also infers harming. Thus this first definition of wrong action is sometimes called "basic non-harming."

As with the other ethical teachings of the Buddha, two things stand out. The first is, if you kill something or hurt it, what effect does it have on the mind?

My family was very poor, and when my uncle was 14 years old he dropped out of school. He got a job at a farm where his job was to kill chickens. That is what he did all day. He killed chickens. When my mother told this story she always cried. Here was this young boy who had to drop out of school so he could do this hideous job, and he hated it.

I have a friend who fought in the Viet Nam War. He once told me that the people who had the most bravado about being soldiers were not the ones who fought on the front lines. In fact, it is very common for combat soldiers to subsequently go into a medical field, something that heals and not harms, and that is exactly what he did.

And of course, throughout history we have had various euphemisms for what we now call "post-traumatic stress disorder" (Internet search:

"george carlin shell shock"). This is a stark reminder of what killing can do to our minds.

I do not hunt or fish, so I cannot comment on what effect that has on the mind. I can only invite you - if you do those things - to see what the mind does with that.

One of the things that happens as our mind develops concentration and tranquility is that acting virtuously becomes more reflexive. It becomes a good habit. In the beginning we have to really think about what we are doing. But over time a calmer more peaceful mind will naturally gravitate toward ethical action. Our fear and old habits lose some of their control over us. Being kind and empathetic becomes more natural. You step around the ants and the spiders because in your heart you know that all living things want to live.

The second type of wrong action is stealing, but note the phrasing here: "abandoning the taking of what is not given." It is also common to take some poetic license and use the phrase "do not take what is not freely given." That, I think, accurately describes the essence. There is an interesting side story about this wording. In the Buddha's home country of Sakya this is how the law against stealing was phrased. It was civil law. There is a story in the Canon about six Sakyan princes inspired to "go forth" and become disciples of the Buddha. They left Sakya with their barber Upāli. At a certain point in their journey they removed their princely clothes and jewelry and gave them to Upāli with the expectation that he would take them back to Sakya with him.

However, Upāli reasoned "the Sakyans are a fierce people. They will think that I have murdered the youths, and they might kill me." So Upāli, too, decided to go forth and ordain as a monk. But before he set off he took the fine things and hung them from a tree saying, "Let him who finds it take it as a gift." By saying this anyone who took these things would not be guilty of stealing because he had "freely offered them." It is a piece of Sakyan civil law captured in the story. [Vin ii.182]

We find all kinds of ways of rationalizing taking things, everything from the office pens to a dollar we find on the streets. I think the wording of this type of wrong action makes it pretty clear what stealing is.

The third type of wrong action is sexual misconduct. The way Sharon Salzberg phrases this is to "abstain from using your sexual energy in a way that causes harm to yourself or someone else." That, too, I think makes this pretty clear. An interesting case is prostitution. Sex with a prostitute may not cause harm to the customer but may be extremely demeaning to the prostitute. And even where sexual activity is not deceitful, like an open marriage, you have to carefully consider the potential harm. People do more crazy, violent, destructive things over sex than any other activity. The first rule in the monastic code is this:

> *Should any bhikkhu - participating in the training and livelihood of the bhikkhus, without having renounced the training, without having declared his weakness - engage in sexual intercourse, even with a female animal, he is defeated and no longer in affiliation.*
>
> - [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Buddhist Monastic Code*, Chapter 4: Pārājika]

In the monastic code there is a lot of space devoted to the topic of sex. Given the above passage, you would think it is pretty clear what the rule about engaging in sex is (i.e., don't). But people find all kinds of ways of pushing the bounds. There are pages and pages in the Vinaya about what exactly constitutes sex. (Yeah, I know, I wouldn't think it's that hard, either.) Monks are not even allowed to be in the company of a woman unattended for fear of that being misinterpreted. This is an area where you have to tread particularly carefully because our sexual energy is so powerful.

Right Livelihood

> *"And what, bhikkhus, is wrong livelihood? Scheming,*

> *talking, hinting, belittling, pursuing gain with gain: this is wrong livelihood."* - [MN 117.29]

It is worth taking a close look at the wording of this passage. The world is full of deceitful people who do everything they can to squeeze money out of you. The Internet has created a whole new class of fraud. I get emails almost every day trying to get me to click on a link so someone can steal my personal information.

Cigarette companies once put chemicals into tobacco to make it more addictive. Here in New Mexico we have "payday loan" companies and "title loan" companies, which are basically legalized loan sharking. Before I moved to New Mexico I had never heard of such things. Pharmaceutical companies invent new "diseases" and then run ads for their drugs so you will pressure your doctor into prescribing them. I think that almost everyone has been a victim of a scam at one time or another.

These examples are pretty blatant, but the issue of right livelihood can be difficult. I have had jobs where I thought I was doing some good, but in retrospect I probably was not. And conversely, there are jobs where I was quite concerned about the ethics involved and we probably did a lot of good.

> *"A lay follower should not engage in five types of business. Which five? Business in weapons, business in human beings, business in meat, business in intoxicants, and business in poison."* - [AN 5.177]

And any kind of livelihood that breaks one of the other ethical principles is suspect as well.

Be wary of confusing right livelihood with political correctness. I went to a retreat once where this very prominent meditation teacher looked at a paper I had filled out that said I was a software engineer. She spent the next 20 minutes on a rant about the evils of corporations. I never said a

word. She read my occupation from a sheet of paper and off she went. (I never again put down my occupation at a meditation retreat.)

I was a psychology major in college and I was originally trained as a community organizer. I worked for several years in social service organizations. I finally left that career under troubling circumstances that involved corrupt administrators. In all of those jobs I had to deal with rampant incompetence. I eventually came to believe that most social service organizations are ineffective and that most therapists do nothing to help their clients.

I spent most of my life working for a company in the field of medical informatics. We developed technology to improve the delivery of medical care. That company was primarily dedicated to its mission, not to making a profit. (I used to jokingly refer to it as "a non-profit corporation.") While we were not ultimately as successful as I wish we could have been, the people there were very dedicated to what we were trying to do.

Be careful about making snap judgments based on a particular occupation. Even the Dalai Lama said once that if a psychotherapist cannot help a large majority of clients (I think he said "80%") they should find another line of work. It is not enough to have a good sounding job.

Right Effort

> *"And what, bhikkhus, is right effort? Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu generates desire for the nonarising of unarisen evil unwholesome states; he makes an effort, arouses energy, applies his mind, and strives. He generates desire for the abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states.... He generates desire for the arising of unarisen wholesome states.... He generates desire for the maintenance of arisen wholesome states, for their nondecay, increase, expansion, and fulfillment by*

development; he makes an effort, arouses energy, applies his mind, and strives. This is called right effort.” - [SN 45.8]

The last three path factors are the “concentration division” of the path.

The quote above gives one common rendering of right effort. It is common to define meditation as something passive. The instruction is to “be with whatever arises.” But as you can probably see by now we are trying to do something quite active. We are training the mind, making it more serene and calm, more skillful. Simply being with whatever arises does not accomplish what the Buddha is entreating us to do. You can be with some pretty unskillful mind states.

Many years ago I started running for exercise. At that time the popular type of training was “long, slow distance,” or “LSD” training. The theory is that by running long, slow distances, you can train the body to run faster. However, after a couple of years of running long, slow distances, I found that what I had trained myself to do was, not surprisingly, run long, slow distances. I never got faster. You can do what you train yourself to do, and if all you train yourself to do is “be with whatever arises,” that is all you will ever be able to do.

Here the Buddha is pretty clear about what our aim is:

1. Make an effort, arouse energy, apply your mind, and strive for the "nonarising of unarisen evil unwholesome states."
2. Make an effort, arouse energy, apply your mind, and strive for the "abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states."
3. Make an effort, arouse energy, apply your mind, and strive for the "arising of unarisen wholesome states."
4. Make an effort, arouse energy, apply your mind, and strive for the "maintenance of arisen wholesome states."

- [SN 51.13]

These are the “Four Right Efforts,” “Four Right Exertions,” “Four Great Efforts,” “Four Right Endeavors,” or “Four Right Strivings.”

Right effort is also about balanced effort, the optimal application of energy. This is especially important in the West where we are so results oriented and achievement oriented. We can really get ourselves tied up in knots. This practice takes lots and lots of time and lots and lots of patience and lots and lots of persistence. On one hand, we have to do it or nothing will happen. On the other hand, if we push too hard that has its own problems. We can burn out and quit.

The Buddha covers this problem in a lovely discourse to Soṇa the monk. He uses the analogy of a musical instrument whose strings are neither too loose nor too tight:

> *Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Rājagaha on Mount Vulture Peak. Now on that occasion the Venerable Soṇa was dwelling at Rājagaha in the Cool Grove.*
>
> *Then, while the Venerable Soṇa was alone in seclusion, the following course of thought arose in his mind: “I am one of the Blessed One’s most energetic disciples, yet my mind has not been liberated from the taints by non-clinging. Now there is wealth in my family, and it is possible for me to enjoy my wealth and do meritorious deeds. Let me then give up the training and return to the lower life, so that I can enjoy my wealth and do meritorious deeds.”*
>
> *Then, having known with his own mind the course of thought in the Venerable Soṇa’s mind, just as a strong man might extend his drawn-in arm or draw in his extended arm, the Blessed One disappeared on Mount Vulture Peak and appeared in the Cool Grove in the*

presence of the Venerable Soṇa. The Blessed One sat down on the seat prepared for him. The Venerable Soṇa paid homage to the Blessed One and sat down to one side. The Blessed One then said to him:

“Soṇa, when you were alone in seclusion, didn’t the following course of thought arise in your mind: ‘I am one of the Blessed One’s most energetic disciples, yet my mind has not been liberated from the taints by non-clinging . Now there is wealth in my family, and it is possible for me to enjoy my wealth and do meritorious deeds. Let me then give up the training and return to the lower life, so that I can enjoy my wealth and do meritorious deeds’?”

“Yes, Bhante.”

“Tell me, Soṇa, in the past, when you lived at home, weren’t you skilled at the lute?”

“Yes, Bhante.”

“What do you think, Soṇa? When its strings were too tight, was your lute well tuned and easy to play?”

“No, Bhante.”

“When its strings were too loose, was your lute well tuned and easy to play?”

“No, Bhante.”

“But, Soṇa, when its strings were neither too tight nor too loose but adjusted to a balanced pitch, was your lute well tuned and easy to play?”

“Yes, Bhante.”

“So too, Soṇa, if energy is aroused too forcefully this leads to restlessness, and if energy is too lax this leads to laziness. Therefore, Soṇa, resolve on a balance of energy, achieve evenness of the spiritual faculties, and take up the object there.” - [AN 6.55]

When we are sleepy, we need more energy. When we are restless, we need more calm. The practice always comes back to balance.

Right Mindfulness

“And what is the faculty of mindfulness? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, is mindful, highly meticulous, remembering and able to call to mind even things that were done and said long ago. He remains focused on the body in and of itself - ardent, alert, and mindful - putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in and of themselves... the mind in and of itself... mental qualities in and of themselves - ardent, alert, and mindful - putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.” - [SN 48.10]

The Pāli word for mindfulness is “sati.” It literally means “to recollect” or “to remember.” This has more meaning in India where to know something is to have memorized it. At the time of the Buddha and for hundreds of years afterwards “sati” meant a) learning the discourses, b) remembering what you learned through your own experience, most especially in your practice, and then c) bringing that to bear in the present moment. In the above quote we see the phrase “remembering and able to call to mind even things that were done and said long ago.”

However, the word “sati” - mindfulness - has taken a beating on its way

to the West. The word “mindfulness” is usually taught as something resembling “attention.” The word “mindfulness” is defined this way at Wikipedia:

> **[Incorrect rendering of “mindfulness”]**
>
> *Mindfulness is the intentional, accepting and non-judgemental focus of one's attention on the emotions, thoughts and sensations occurring in the present moment.* - [Wikipedia]

Here is how Psychology Today defines it:

> **[Second incorrect rendering of “mindfulness”]**
>
> *Mindfulness is a state of active, open attention on the present.* - [Psychology Today]

You have probably seen definitions like this.

But the word “attention” in Pāli is not “sati” but “manasikāra.” Further, the Buddha does not prescribe simple attention, he teaches “appropriate attention,” also called “wise attention,” which in Pāli is “yoniso manasikāra.” Thus, the attention is not “non-judgmental” or simply “open”:

> *“Bhikkhus, I say that the destruction of the taints is for one who knows and sees, not for one who does not know and see. Who knows and sees what? Wise attention and unwise attention. When one attends unwisely, unarisen taints arise and arisen taints increase. When one attends wisely, unarisen taints do not arise and arisen taints are abandoned.”* - [MN 2.3]

In the same sutta he said:

> *“Here, bhikkhus, an untaught ordinary person, who has no regard for noble ones and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, who has no regard for true men and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, does not understand what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention.”* - [MN 2.5]

Thus, there is wise attention and unwise attention, and the attention of those skilled in the Dhamma and the attention of those who are not skilled in the Dhamma. There are things fit for attention and things unfit for attention. The type of wise attention that the Buddha prescribes has skill, meaning, and purpose. But however you look at it, mindfulness - “sati” - is not “attention.”

A sniper has non-judgmental, open attention to the present moment while he is in the act of killing. But it is not mindful because he is not keeping in mind, remembering, or recollecting the teachings on non-harming, kindness, compassion, love, and wisdom. It is not very karmically skillful.

I have a friend who calls mindfulness “judgmental attention.” That is a pretty good rendering. The only caveat is that the judgment is good judgment, not bad.

Despite the confusion, the rendering of “sati” as “mindfulness” is actually quite clever:

> *When, in the nineteenth century, T. W. Rhys Davids encountered the word sati while translating DN 22 into English, he tried to find an English term that would convey this meaning of memory applied to purposeful activity in the present. Concluding that English didn’t have an adequate equivalent, he made up his own: mindfulness. This, of course, wasn’t a total invention. In*

fact, Rhys Davids' choice was apparently inspired by the phrasing of the Anglican prayer to be ever mindful of the needs of others - i.e., to always keep their needs in mind. Rhys Davids simply turned the adjective into a noun. Although the term mindfulness has its origins in a Christian context, and although its meaning has ironically become so distorted over the past century, its original meaning serves so well in conveying the Buddhist sense of memory applied to the present that I will continue to use it to render sati for the remainder of this book.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Right Mindfulness*]

The Buddha usually linked mindfulness with other qualities. For example, in the "Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: The Four Foundations of Mindfulness" [MN 10] he linked mindfulness with ardency and alertness:

He abides contemplating mind as mind, ardent, alert, and mindful... - [MN 10.3]

This formula repeats itself as a "stock phrase" in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta.

The Buddha's instructions, then, are to be (1) ardent, (2) alert, and (3) mindful, and to do so with wise attention:

All three of these qualities get their focus from what the Buddha called "yoniso manasikāra," "appropriate attention." Notice: That's "appropriate attention," not "bare attention." The Buddha discovered that the way you attend to things is determined by what you see as important: the questions you bring to the practice, the problems you want the practice to solve. No act of attention is ever "bare." If there were no problems in life you could open yourself up choicelessly to whatever

came along. But the fact is there is a big problem smack dab in the middle of everything you do: the suffering that comes from acting in ignorance. This is why the Buddha doesn't tell you to view each moment with a beginner's eyes. You've got to keep the issue of suffering and its end always in mind.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "Mindfulness Defined"]

From the standpoint of practice, the best way to understand "sati" is that it means to "keep something in mind." We start by keeping the breath in mind. But we do so on a foundation of right view, what we are learning here. That is very important, meditating with a firm foundation of right view. Otherwise you could just follow the breath forever and who knows where that might take you? Maybe - probably - nowhere. So in our current examination of the Four Noble Truths, we are starting to lay the groundwork for where the breath can take us.

There is an art and a craft to meditation. Suppose you are a crafts-person and you make fine furniture. When you are building a beautiful dresser, with curved, sculpted legs, and wood inlay, finished with a custom crafted oil stain, at any given moment you bring to bear all the knowledge and training that you have. Everything that you learned from teachers and mentors and peers, and everything that you have read, everything that you have learned on your own, along with skills that you perfected like the precise way to hold a carving blade, the amount of pressure to get the cut just right, along with your energy and attention and state of mind in the present moment. That is "mindfulness."

There are some important discourses devoted to mindfulness. These include the "Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: The Foundations of Mindfulness" [MN 10], the "Ānāpānasati Sutta: Mindfulness of Breathing" [MN 118], and the "Kāyagatāsati Sutta: Mindfulness of the Body" [MN 119].

Right Concentration

"And what, friends, is right concentration? Here, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. With the stilling of applied and sustained thought, he enters upon and abides in the second jhāna, which has self-confidence and singleness of mind without applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of concentration. With the fading away as well of rapture, he abides in equanimity, and mindful and fully aware, still feeling pleasure with the body, he enters upon and abides in the third jhāna, on account of which noble ones announce: 'He has a pleasant abiding who has equanimity and is mindful.' With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, he enters upon and abides in the fourth jhāna, which has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and purity of mindfulness due to equanimity. This is called right concentration." - [MN 141.31]

As you can see here, the Buddha defined right concentration as the four jhānas, the states of meditative absorption.

There is some confusion about what jhāna is, and just what mind states qualify as jhāna. In the Pāli Canon, there are four jhānas. Each jhāna is distinguished by "jhāna factors":

1. 1st jhāna - applied and sustained thought, rapture and pleasure
2. 2nd jhāna - self-confidence and singleness of mind, rapture and pleasure
3. 3rd jhāna - pleasure and equanimity
4. 4th jhāna - equanimity

In addition, the Canon describes five "arupas," or "immaterial

attainments," that are also states of concentration:

1. The base of boundless space
2. The base of boundless consciousness
3. The base of nothingness
4. The base of neither perception nor non-perception.
5. The cessation of feelings and perceptions

The confusion comes from a later reformulation of what constitutes jhāna in the *Visuddhimagga*.

The *Visuddhimagga* was written by Buddhaghosa (literally "voice of the Buddha") around 430 CE in Sri Lanka. It is the mainstream interpretation of southern, Theravada Buddhism. In the *Visuddhimagga* the first four arupas become jhānas 5-8, and the fifth arupa drops out of the group altogether. Even later the fifth arupa informally comes to be called the "9th jhāna." Thus by later understanding there are either 8 or 9 jhānas.

According to the Buddha, any of the first four jhānas can lead to an awakening. However, the most common path is to master the first four jhānas prior to awakening, just as the Buddha did.

It is not trivial to attain jhāna, but it is possible. It takes diligence, patience, and persistence. The attainment of jhāna is one of the things toward which we are working.

When you are practicing, you start with mindfulness. When mindfulness becomes strong, it leads to concentration. Eventually they become mutually supporting. Strong mindfulness leads to greater concentration, and strong concentration leads to greater mindfulness. It is a positive feedback loop.

And in the meantime you are developing some wonderful qualities: calm, serenity, tranquility, and a sense of well-being. There is a process of self-nurturing. You are taking care of yourself, and you are creating a place of safety and healing for yourself.

As concentration and mindfulness reinforce each other, you are developing “samatha” and “vipassana,” serenity and insight.

> *“These two things - serenity and insight - occur in him yoked evenly together.”* - [MN 149.10]

You may have heard the expression “dry insight.” The notion behind dry insight is that awakening can happen without jhāna. But the evidence in the Pāli Canon is overwhelmingly against that idea. The arguments for dry insight are, at best, a stretch, while the Buddha’s teachings show that jhāna is central to the practice leading to awakening.

Part of the problem is that in the *Visuddhimagga* jhāna morphed into something impossibly difficult, literally attainable by only “1 in a million.” But if that were true then almost no one could become enlightened. So what probably happened after that was the understanding was jhāna isn't really required to become enlightened. So by misdefining jhāna its importance to the practice was lost.

It is also worth noting what “insight” means. In a Buddhist context, insight refers to one of the supermundane teachings, such as dependent origination/co-arising (the Buddha’s law of causality), karma (wholesome actions bring wholesome results), the Four Noble Truths, and the “three marks of conditioned existence”: dukkha, non-self, and impermanence. These are the wisdom teachings of the Buddha.

However, this does not mean that meditation cannot lead to more mundane, every day insights. These mundane insights can and do occur in meditation. But the real prize is insights that you get into the supermundane, to a final awakening, and freedom from suffering, anxiety, and stress.

4. Karma

An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy.

"It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego."

He continued, "The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

- [Cherokee Legend]

Buddhism is famously creedless. When you formally become a Buddhist you do not agree to subscribe to a creed or belief system. You agree to behave in a certain way. This is what the lay precepts and the Vinaya, the monastic code, prescribe. This is called an "orthopraxy," which is a system of behavior. This is in contrast to orthodoxy, which is a system of belief.

However, obviously you have to believe something to progress on the path. And this is the question that the Buddhist monk Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu put to his teacher Ajahn Fuang when he first went to Thailand.

What do you have to believe in order to be a Buddhist? Ajahn Fuang's response was that you won't get very far in the practice if you do not believe that your actions have consequences.

This is the most fundamental principal of Buddhism. Our futures do not depend on random circumstances. They are not determined by destiny or fate. They are not determined by a higher power. They are determined by the skill of our actions. This point is made most directly in the "Ambalaṭṭhikā-rāhulovāda Sutta: Advice to Rāhula at Ambalaṭṭhika" [MN 61].

Rāhula was the Buddha's son. At the time of this discourse Rāhula was only seven years old. It is an interesting problem: How do you explain Buddhadharma to a seven-year-old?

The Buddha's advice was for Rāhula to reflect on the consequences of his actions:

> *"Rāhula, when you wish to do an action with the body, you should reflect upon that same bodily action thus: 'Would this action that I wish to do with the body lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both? Is it an unwholesome bodily action with painful consequences, with painful results?' When you reflect, if you know: 'This action that I wish to do with the body would lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both; it is an unwholesome bodily action with painful consequences, with painful results,' then you definitely should not do such an action with the body. But when you reflect, if you know: 'This action that I wish to do with the body would not lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both; it is a wholesome bodily action with pleasant consequences, with pleasant results,' then you may do such an action with the body."* - [MN 61.9]

The Buddha used this explanation for thoughts and speech and for actions in the past, present, and future. It is thus by constant evaluation of your actions and their consequences that you – as Larry Rosenberg puts it – "learn your way out of suffering."

This is such an important teaching that the Buddha went on to say that whoever became awakened in the past or will become awakened in the future does so through this type of reflection:

> *"Rāhula, whatever recluses and brahmāns in the past purified their bodily action, their verbal action, and their mental action, all did so by repeatedly reflecting thus. Whatever recluses and brahmāns in the future will purify their bodily action, their verbal action, and their mental action, all will do so by repeatedly reflecting thus. Whatever recluses and brahmāns in the present are purifying their bodily action, their verbal action, and their mental action, all are doing so by repeatedly reflecting thus. Therefore, Rāhula, you should train thus: 'We will purify our bodily action, our verbal action, and our mental action by repeatedly reflecting upon them."* - [MN 61.18]

Karma as Intention

> *"Intention, I tell you, is kamma. Intending, one does kamma by way of body, speech, and mind."* - [AN 6.63]

The word "karma" literally means "action." However the Buddha also said that it is the intention behind the action that determines the karmic result. So an unskillful action does not have a negative result if the intention was skillful, i.e., accidents happen. Conversely, a skillful action does not bring merit unless the intention was also skillful i.e., accidents happen. The monastic code makes this clear:

> *The system of penalties the Buddha worked out for the*

rules is based on two principles. The first is that the training aims primarily at the development of the mind. Thus the factors of intention and perception often determine whether or not a particular action is an infringement of a rule. For instance, killing an animal accidentally is, in terms of the mind of the agent, very different from killing it purposefully, and does not count as an infringement of the rule against killing.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "Introduction to the Patimokkha Rules"]

This does not mean that sloppy inattention gets you off the hook. What we are discussing is "skillful intention." This includes a) an altruistic motivation, b) wisdom, and c) appropriate attention.

In the Buddha's system of training, the first of these, altruistic intention, is cultivated through the development of the "brahma vihāras," the "noble abidings." These are loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.

The second of these, wisdom, is cultivated by a combination of right view coupled with reflection and discernment. This is the kind of reflection that the Buddha taught to Rāhula.

The third of these, appropriate attention, is cultivated through breath meditation. Attention is "appropriate" when it is used to develop wholesome qualities. It is inappropriate when it develops unwholesome qualities. This is why the teaching to simply be with whatever arises in the modern mindfulness movement is problematical. You can be with some pretty unwholesome mind states. To be sure, sometimes that is the best that you can do. However, the goal is to learn to abandon unwholesome states, not just to "be with them." As we have seen, this is the teaching on the "Four Right Exertions":

"And what, bhikkhus, is right effort? Here, bhikkhus, 1) a

> *bhikkhu generates desire for the nonarising of unarisen evil unwholesome states; he makes an effort, arouses energy, applies his mind, and strives. 2) He generates desire for the abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states.... 3) He generates desire for the arising of unarisen wholesome states.... 4) He generates desire for the maintenance of arisen wholesome states, for their nondecay, increase, expansion, and fulfilment by development; he makes an effort, arouses energy, applies his mind, and strives. This is called right effort."* - [SN 45.8]

We usually put our energy into "doing the right thing." There is nothing wrong with that; it is a noble effort. But we can get tied up in knots trying to reason out the ethical response to a situation. The Buddha is suggesting that we might be better served by working on our motivation.

Some years ago I was working in a very stressful environment, and I had an uncomfortable meeting with the head of my department. I had been thinking about skillful intention, and so during the meeting, I put my energy into thoughts of patience, kindness, and openness. I concentrated on conjuring up a wholesome state of mind and letting the results take care of themselves.

It was almost an out-of-body experience. I was able to respectfully acknowledge the other person while still standing my ground. What could have been an ugly scene had an optimal result. We aired our differences and no employees were injured.

So the first point to make about karma is that our actions have results. The second point is that the intention behind the action determines the result.

Karma as a Complex System

The third point about karma is that it is non-linear, and it is not deterministic. This is perhaps the most common misunderstanding about karma. When something goes wrong you will hear people say that it is due to their bad karma.

The results of our past actions are one factor in what happens in the present moment, but they are not the only one. What happens at any given time is the result of so many causes and conditions that the Buddha said that if you try to understand them all you will go mad:

> *"The result of kamma is an inconceivable matter that one should not try to conceive; one who tries to conceive it would reap either madness or frustration."* - [AN 4.77]

A few years ago when a tsunami struck Asia, I heard a prominent Tibetan Lama say that the reason all those people died was because of their karma. This is a complete misunderstanding of why things happen. Earthquakes happen because tectonic plates move, not because everyone who lives near the fault line did something bad in a previous life.

Some people want the law of karma to be this way, to be deterministic and punitive, to be a doctrine of righteousness:

> *There are many people who would like the teaching of karma to be a theory of justice. People really would like the world be a just place. Karma is one way of getting justice out of the world, because it guarantees that the sucker will get his due sooner or later. The idea here is that there is a wonderful correlation that every action has a karmic result, or every result has a karmic source. If someone has stolen from you, or has done something terrible to you, as a result you have became poor by the end of your life, while the offender has become rich and dies rich. We would like to think that the offender will get his just punishment in the next life. That is the balance –*

the confirmation of justice is maintained by having a theory of multiple lifetimes in which everything works out eventually. But I don't think that the Buddhist idea of karma was meant to be a form of justice. It is not supposed to explain everything and why everything is happening the way it is.

- [Gil Fronsdal, "Karma and Intention"]

Good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people. Everyone has good and bad karma. An important factor is what karma manifests at a given time. This is why good people can have unhappy lives and bad people can have good lives. In the "Mahākammavibhanga Sutta: The Greater Exposition of Action" [MN 136] the Buddha said this about karma and rebirth:

"Ānanda, there are four kinds of persons to be found existing in the world. What four? Here some person kills living beings, takes what is not given, misconducts himself in sensual pleasures, speaks falsehood, speaks maliciously, speaks harshly, gossips; he is covetous, has a mind of ill will, and holds wrong view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a state of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell.

"But here some person kills living beings... and holds wrong view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world.

"Here some person abstains from killing living beings, from taking what is not given, from misconduct in sensual pleasures, from false speech, from malicious speech,

from harsh speech, from gossip; he is not covetous, his mind is without ill will, and he holds right view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world.

"But here some person abstains from killing living beings... and he holds right view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a state of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell." - [MN 136]

Part of the Buddhist tradition is that the state of mind at death is extremely important in determining our next rebirth. If the mind is at ease when we die the probability that good karma will manifest increases. If the mind is agitated when we die the probability that negative karma will manifest increases.

Traditional Buddhists are particularly adamant about being allowed to die in peaceful circumstances. The consciousness is quite fragile at the time of death and for some time afterwards, as people who have near-death experiences tell us. The usual time to wait for cremation is three days although this varies by school. More importantly the area around the body should be free from negative energy. There should be no crying, sadness or hysteria. It is particularly auspicious to have a monk or nun preside over the death.

There is a famous story about Mahatma Gandhi and his death. Because of the political turmoil in India, Gandhi had a pretty good idea that he might be assassinated. But he was determined to die with love in his heart. He said, "If I am to die by the bullet of a madman, I must do so smiling. There must be no anger within me."

On January 30, 1948, Gandhi was fatally shot three times by a young man named "Nathuram Godse." Before he fell to the ground, Gandhi raised his hands to his face in the traditional Hindu greeting and bowed to Godse.

The Probabilistic Nature of Karma

So, you might ask, if what happens to us is the result of such complex conditions why bother to cultivate virtue?

One reason is that while we cannot guarantee a wonderful future for ourselves, we can improve the odds. By cultivating generosity, kindness, love, compassion, wisdom, virtue, you will not only be a happier, more contented person, the chances of you having a happy future are greatly enhanced. You are playing the lottery with a lot of possible winning numbers.

The other reason is that even when we do something unskillful, the negative effect is dampened. The negative energy is absorbed and dissipated. The Buddha uses the analogy of a lump of salt to demonstrates this point:

> *"Here, bhikkhus, some person has created trifling bad kamma yet it leads him to hell, while some other person here has created exactly the same trifling kamma yet it is to be experienced in this very life, without even a slight [residue] being seen, much less abundant [residue].*
>
> *"What kind of person creates trifling bad kamma that leads him to hell? Here, some person is undeveloped in body, virtuous behavior, mind, and wisdom; he is limited and has a mean character, and he dwells in suffering. When such a person creates trifling bad kamma, it leads him to hell.*
>
> *"What kind of person creates exactly the same trifling bad kamma and yet it is to be experienced in this very life, without even a slight [residue] being seen, much less abundant [residue]? Here, some person is developed in body, virtuous behavior, mind, and wisdom. He is*

unlimited and has a lofty character, and he dwells without measure. When such a person creates exactly the same trifling bad kamma, it is to be experienced in this very life, without even a slight [residue] being seen, much less abundant [residue].

“Suppose a man would drop a lump of salt into a small bowl of water. What do you think, bhikkhus? Would that lump of salt make the small quantity of water in the bowl salty and undrinkable?”

“Yes, lord.”

“For what reason? Because the water in the bowl is limited, thus that lump of salt would make it salty and undrinkable.”

“But suppose a man would drop a lump of salt into the river Ganges. What do you think, bhikkhus? Would that lump of salt make the river Ganges become salty and undrinkable?”

“No, Bhante.”

“For what reason? Because the river Ganges contains a large volume of water, thus that lump of salt would not make it salty and undrinkable.”

“So too, bhikkhus, some person here has created trifling bad kamma yet it leads him to hell, while some other person here has created exactly the same trifling kamma yet it is to be experienced in this very life, without even a slight [residue] being seen, much less abundant [residue].” - [AN 3:100]

The greater our virtue, the greater our wisdom, and the greater our appropriate attention, the larger our "volume of water." The occasional indiscretion gets absorbed like a lump of salt in the Ganges.

Along these lines, there is a touching story in the Pāli Canon about King Pasenadi and his Queen, Mallikā. Mallikā was a particularly virtuous, saintly person, and the King, despite the usual ups and downs of a royal marriage, loved her dearly. But she had committed an act of sexual indiscretion, and then compounded it by lying to the King about it. When she died, this weighed on her mind, and as a result she was reborn in one of the hell realms. However, because she was an otherwise virtuous person, she only spent seven days there, after which she was reborn in "the Tusita heaven."

While all this was happening, King Pasenadi, who was concerned about her welfare, asked the Buddha where she had been reborn. Out of compassion, the Buddha did not tell him. Also, King Pasenadi's faith in the Dharma was weak, so the Buddha did not want to discourage him. Thus, according to the story, the Buddha used his psychic powers to make King Pasenadi forget to ask the question.

After that seventh day, the Buddha went to King Pasenadi's palace for almsfood. The King finally remembered (!) to ask where the Queen was reborn. The Buddha told him that she was reborn in the Tusita heaven. The King was very pleased and said, "Where else could she be reborn? She was always thinking of doing good deeds. Venerable Sir! Now that she is gone, I, your humble disciple, hardly know what to do." In order to encourage the King in the Dharma, the Buddha told him:

> *"Even royal chariots rot,*
> *the body too does rot, decay,*
> *but undecaying's Dhamma of the Good*
> *who to the good declare."*
> - [Dhp 151]

(This story is not a discourse of the Buddha or one of his disciples. It

comes from the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*, which is a commentary on the *Dhammapada*. The reference is iii, 119-123. But whether it is true or not it's still a good story. Internet search: "buddhist women mallika")

So the odds of a favorable result improve in two ways. One is that we simply have more good karma, so good karma is more likely to manifest. The other reason is that even when bad karma does manifest, our river of virtue absorbs it.

Choice

So far we have discussed past karma. But there is also present karma, the choices we make in the present moment.

Your state of mind influences the experience of the present moment. Someone cuts you off in traffic. That is simply an event. The next issue is what state of heart and mind do you bring to the experience? Are you tired and frustrated and angry? That will manifest in one way. Are you calm, and tranquil and happy? That will manifest in another way.

We are cultivating a mind that is more skillful, more altruistic and wiser, calmer and more serene, and that affects what manifests in the present moment. Two people can have the same experience and have two different responses to that experience. And the same person can have a different response to the same set of conditions depending on their state of mind in the present moment.

This makes it possible to intervene in the present moment and modify the result. A skillful action with a skillful intention makes it possible to create a positive outcome even if negative karma is manifesting.

An extreme example of this was Angulimala, the serial killer who became an arahant. If unwholesome karma were deterministic, if it always manifested as an unwholesome result, then it would not have been possible for Angulimala to become Enlightened. He would have had to suffer the consequences of his actions first [MN 86]. Of course,

Angulimala did not get off the hook entirely. People knew who he was, and they used to throw things at him when he went on alms rounds. But being an arahant is a better outcome than being reborn in hell.

A trained mind exercises choice. It is an empowered mind. An untrained mind does not exercise choice. It acts on impulse. One of the things that we are doing by training the mind is we are asserting control over it. We are subduing the Nazis running around in our heads:

> *There was a period of time in my Buddhist practice where I became very good at ... learning how to just be with things, and just let go of everything else. I would just let go and let go and just be really present. That can be very peaceful, and life could be very peaceful, very content, and very happy just being present by letting go. That was quite fine when I was a monk since I did not have to make a lot of choices. Then I became a parent, and just letting go and being present was not going to be enough. Lying in bed at two o'clock in the morning when the kid has an earache, or the two kids are fighting. Just let go, let go - this is not enough. You have to make a choice about how to act. You have to be creative and think ahead. A lot of thought has to go into how to respond to this situation. You cannot just sit there and be present to this situation. Being present and letting go is very important, but there is more to it. Something is required of us. So what do we do about that part of life when something is required of us? Buddha's teachings about karma have a lot to do with this aspect of our lives, the places where we have choice, and how we make choices. The practice of mindfulness brings us to that place where we see that we have a choice.*
>
> - [Gil Fronsdal, "Karma and Intention"]

You don't have to believe an abstract theory on karma and you do not have to believe in rebirth; you will see it work in this lifetime. A mind that is cultivating virtue is evolving toward greater joy, greater happiness, and less suffering. You may need a little faith in the process, but eventually you will reap the fruits of skillful intentions. You do not need to wait until some future life. You do not even have to believe that there will be a future life. A heart that is open, warm, kind, loving, wise, and at peace with itself is its own reward.

The End of Karma

You may have surmised by now that there are limits to what good karma can bring you. All unenlightened beings have mixed karma, and bad karma can always manifest. And the physical forces of the universe play their part. There are always those pesky tectonic plates moving about. Conditioned existence is very risky and full of dangers.

The Buddha was after something better than simply improving the odds. And according to the Buddha's teaching, as beings are born and reborn into different realms, even skillful beings eventually fall into bad habits. They become proud. They become vain. They become pleased with themselves, and oops, there you go, sliding down the karmic chain. They inevitably end up in an unhappy place. This dance has been going on throughout limitless lifetimes.

On the night of his awakening, therefore, he kept looking. He did not just want to acquire good karma; he wanted it to end. He wanted to free himself from the uncertainties of conditioned existence. This is a radical notion. Now, the path to ending karma runs through the process of first developing good karma. So don't think that everything that we are doing is for naught. This is a journey of a thousand miles. You can't skip steps. That is why there are books on meditation called *Breath by Breath* and *With Each and Every Breath*. It is one breath at a time. It is one moment at a time. And progress is not linear. It is steps forward and back and forward and back. It requires patience and persistence.

But out there over the horizon is this intriguing notion that we can stop creating karma altogether. We can free ourselves from the uncertainties of conditioned existence. We can guarantee our happiness, and we can end our suffering:

> *"Bhikkhus, there are these four kinds of kamma proclaimed by me after I realized them for myself with direct knowledge. What four? There is dark kamma with dark result; there is bright kamma with bright result ; there is dark-and-bright kamma with dark-and-bright result; and there is kamma that is neither dark nor bright with neither-dark-nor-bright result, kamma that leads to the destruction of kamma. These are the four kinds of kamma proclaimed by me after I realized them for myself with direct knowledge."* - [AN 4.232]

It is this fourth kind of karma, karma that leads to the destruction of karma, that the Buddha was looking for. This is the topic of the next chapter, the law of causation, "dependent co-arising."

5. Dependent Co-arising

> *“Here, Ānanda, a bhikkhu knows thus: ‘When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.”* - [MN 115.11]

The Buddha's most complicated teaching is on causation. The word in Pāli is “paṭicca-samuppāda” (Sanskrit: pratītya-samutpāda). “Paṭicca-samuppāda” is variously translated as “dependent origination,” “dependent co-origination,” “dependent arising,” or “dependent co-arising.”

The Buddha gives different formulations of the causation process in the Pāli Canon. The simplest one is shown above. It is called “this-that” conditionality. It is reflective of his teaching on right effort, the “Four Right Exertions”:

1. Generating desire for the nonarising of unarisen evil unwholesome states
2. Generating desire for the abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states
3. Generating desire for the arising of unarisen wholesome states
4. Generating desire for the maintenance of arisen wholesome states

In “this-that conditionality” the way he expresses this same idea is to prevent the arising of the causes and conditions of unwholesome mind states:

> *When this does not exist, that does not come to be.*

Abandon arisen unwholesome mind states:

> *With the cessation of this, that ceases.*

Cultivate the causes and conditions for wholesome mind states:

> *When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises.*

In the most detailed discourses on dependent co-arising, the Buddha describes 12 steps in the causal chain:

> *"With ignorance as condition, volitional formations [come to be];*
> *with volitional formations as condition, consciousness;*
> *with consciousness as condition, name-and-form;*
> *with name-and-form as condition, the six sense bases;*
> *with the six sense bases as condition, contact;*
> *with contact as condition, feeling;*
> *with feeling as condition, craving;*
> *with craving as condition, clinging;*
> *with clinging as condition, existence;*
> *with existence as condition, birth;*
> *with birth as condition, aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering."* - [MN 115.11]

Other suttas describe slightly different versions of the chain. In the "Mahāpadāna Sutta: The Great Discourse on the Lineage" [DN 14.2.18] there are ten links instead of twelve, and the "Mahānidāna Sutta: The Great Discourse on Origination" [DN 15.2] also leaves out the six sense-bases, for a total of nine links. However, the two versions that are most commonly taught are "this-that conditionality" and the "12 links."

Later Interpretations

In the centuries that followed the Buddha's death there were many different interpretations of the Buddha's teachings on causation. One of

them is here where the links in the chain are a circle, or wheel. In Indian philosophy a wheel symbolizes completeness so the implication may be that this teaching is whole and complete:

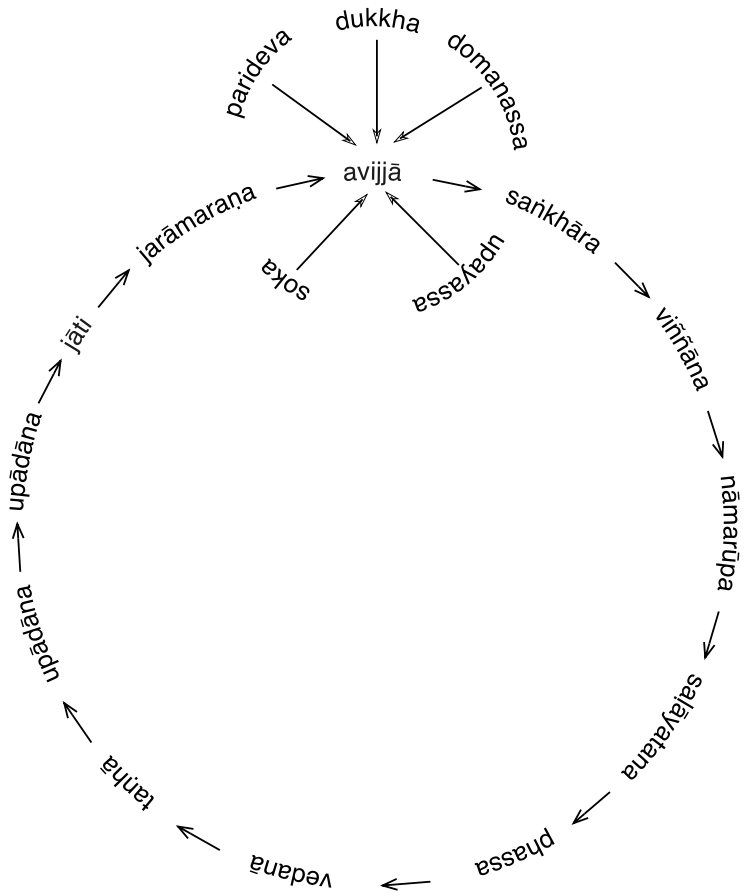

Figure: Traditional Theravada Representation of the Chain of Dependent Co-arising

In another formulation, the 12 steps play out over three lifetimes:

> *One way to understand [the links] is sequentially, over a period of three lifetimes: the past life, the present life and the future life. In this case, ignorance and mental formation belong to the past life. They represent the conditions that are responsible for the occurrence of this life. The following components of dependent origination - consciousness, name and form, the six senses, contact,*

> *feeling, craving, clinging and becoming - belong to this life. In brief, these eight components constitute the process of evolution within this life. The last two components - birth and old age and death - belong to the future life. According to this scheme, we can see how the twelve components of dependent origination are distributed over the period of three lifetimes, and how the first two - ignorance and mental formation result in the emergence of this life with its psycho-physical personality and how in turn, the actions performed in this life result in rebirth in the future life. This is one popular and authoritative way of interpreting the twelve components of dependent origination.* - ["Fundamentals of Buddhism: Dependent Origination"]

However, there are very few people today who think that these are valid interpretations. I mention them because they still linger in the Buddhist world. 2,000 years creates a lot of inertia.

There is still no consensus about the meaning of dependent co-arising. Ajahn Punnadhammo says that when he was at the monastery in Thailand, the hottest debate topics were a) dependent co-arising and b) whether you can eat cheese after noon. (This is an in-joke. Monks are not allowed to eat solid food after noon, so the issue is whether cheese is a solid food.)

So dependent co-arising is like the joke about Israeli politics where you have two Jews and three opinions.

Even in the Buddha's time this was not a trivial topic. In this conversation the Buddha cautioned his attendant Ānanda not to underestimate how difficult it is to fully comprehend:

> *Ven. Ānanda approached the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One, sat to one side.*

> *As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One: "It's amazing, lord, it's astounding, how deep this dependent co-arising is, and how deep its appearance, and yet to me it seems as clear as clear can be."*
>
> *[The Buddha:] "Don't say that, Ānanda. Don't say that. Deep is this dependent co-arising, and deep its appearance. It's because of not understanding and not penetrating this Dhamma that this generation is like a tangled skein, a knotted ball of string, like matted rushes and reeds, and does not go beyond transmigration, beyond the planes of deprivation, woe, and bad destinations."* - [DN 15.1]

And in another sutta Sāriputta quotes the Buddha as equating the understanding of dependent co-arising with awakening itself:

> *Now this has been said by the Blessed One: "One who sees dependent co-arising sees the Dhamma; one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent co-arising."* - [MN 28.28]

This is not to scare you off, simply to make the points that a) there are different interpretations of dependent co-arising and b) if you want to understand it you are going to have to work at it. When the Buddha had the above conversation with Ānanda, Ānanda was a stream-enterer. He had attained the first stage of awakening. Ānanda had a brilliant mind and was an advanced and skilled practitioner. So this is not a trivial topic.

I also have a personal history with dependent co-arising. Over the years I listened to many, many Dharma talks and read many books on the subject. None of them made sense to me. It all sounded like a lot of hand waving. The physical universe is coldly indifferent to your opinions about it. The devil is always in the details. And I was never convinced

that anyone who was teaching dependent co-arising understood it.

Then one day I was talking to a Dharma sister about my frustration with this Dharmic hand waving, and she pointed me to the one source that does make sense to me. The name of the book is *The Shape of Suffering*, by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. Ṭhānissaro also has a shorter explanation in his book *The Wings to Awakening* (in the section on kamma). If you want a detailed explanation of dependent co-arising, these are the places to look. Here I will summarize the main points.

Modern Models

The use of "co-" in the English terms for Buddhist causality shows that it is not like a row of dominoes, one knocking down the next in a linear fashion. This is the flaw in the wheel model. Dependent co-arising is the more complex causation found in non-linear systems such as the weather and climate change.

We are fortunate to live in a time when we have a language with which to discuss the Buddha's teachings on causation. We have physical and philosophical models on which to draw. This puts our ancestors at something of a disadvantage. I think this is one of the reasons why teachings on causality that came after the Buddha's death are often off the mark.

One of those modern models is "the butterfly effect," the term famously coined by Edward Lorenz. It refers to how the flapping of a butterfly's wings can affect a hurricane several weeks later. Minute changes in non-linear systems can have dramatic and greatly amplified effects in the output.

Another model is quantum physics. When I was growing up, even though we knew better by then, I learned that the elements in the periodic table make up everything in the universe. They are the basic building blocks. But quantum physics describes the world underlying those elements. The elements exist only as long as the proper causes and

conditions make them exist:

> *And so, having studied the atom, I am telling you that* ***there is no matter as such****. All matter arises and persists only due to a force that causes the atomic particles to vibrate, holding them together in the tiniest of solar systems, the atom.*
>
> - [Max Planck]

(This is not to say that quantum physics and the butterfly effect are the same as Buddhist causality, only that they are analogous.)

Planck's idea of "particles vibrating" has a Buddhist corollary. I once heard a monk talk about the different realms in the Buddhist cosmology and he suggested that these different realms exist in the same physical space as our realm; they are just at a different vibrational frequency. We know that most of the physical world is empty space. We usually think of heaven as being above us and hell as being below us. He was saying that heaven is right next door - vibrationally speaking - as is hell. And one reason that we can occasionally see beings like ghosts is that their vibrational frequency is close to ours.

The Buddha described life in a similar way to quantum physics. There are causes and conditions, and they give rise to results, and those results become causes and conditions for other results. We don't live in a world of things; we live in a world of processes, a world of phenomena. The modern term for this is "radical phenomenology." It's a world where "nothing exists, everything happens."

When Darwinists, who had been so castigated in the West for their theory of evolution, went to Japan in the 19th century, they were shocked that the Japanese embraced and celebrated their ideas. Buddhism heavily influences the Japanese, and Buddhists used Darwinism as proof that what they had said all along was true. Everything changes all the time. Rather than running counter to the accepted norm in religious thinking,

it gave it credence.

When you turn your attention from the physical world to the mind, you see the same process. Your mind is not the same from moment to moment. Your mind is not now where it was even a second ago. Of course, we have habits and tendencies and temperaments. But changing the underlying causes and conditions also changes the results. Our minds are like weather systems, and that makes it possible for us to change. It is actually good news.

Thus, we can say several things about causation:

1. Causation is non-linear.
2. Feedback loops can accelerate internal "sub-chains."
3. Small changes can have greatly amplified results.
4. We live in a world of processes and phenomena, not solid things. Nothing exists, everything happens.

The Twelve Link Chain of Dependent Co-arising

> *"And what, bhikkhus, is dependent origination? With ignorance as condition, volitional formations [come to be]; with volitional formations as condition, consciousness; with consciousness as condition, name-and-form; with name-and-form as condition, the six sense bases; with the six sense bases as condition, contact; with contact as condition, feeling; with feeling as condition, craving; with craving as condition, clinging; with clinging as condition, existence; with existence as condition, birth; with birth as condition, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. This, bhikkhus, is called dependent origination."* - [SN

12.1]

The chain starts with ignorance. In this case “ignorance” means ignorance of the Four Noble Truths, but it includes all the wisdom teachings that we are discussing. It is a lack of right view. But this is not intellectual knowledge; it is an inability to penetrate right view through direct experience. We cannot just read about it and be free from our suffering.

Next we see that with ignorance as a condition, volitional formations arise. The term “volitional” indicates that these are willful actions. There is an intention behind them. Ṭhānissaro calls them “fabrications.” (The Pāli term is the famously enigmatic word “saṇkhāra.”) We are actually fabricating our experience and those fabrications arise out of ignorance.

These fabrications are of three kinds: bodily, verbal, and mental. The latter are mainly thoughts, but includes any mental activity. More subtly behind every action is the intention, a slight stirring that precedes every action. This intention is also a fabrication. We are constantly engaged in actions of some type. And it isn't that ignorance causes them; it is simply that they arise with ignorance as a condition. Where there is a volitional formation/fabrication there is also ignorance, i.e., the earth does not cause a seed to sprout, but it is a necessary condition.

This is how volitional formations play out during a lifetime. But there is also a transcendent aspect to these phenomena. There is a mundane or worldly mode in which causality operates and a transcendent mode. The latter has to do with rebirth and cosmology. The volitional formations are what continue from lifetime to lifetime. It is karmic momentum.

With these volitional formations as a condition, consciousness arises. The word “consciousness” gets used in a number of different contexts in Buddhism. In this case, in the worldly sense, consciousness means awareness, i.e., you are conscious of your actions.

In the transcendent sense consciousness is what enters a new being at

conception. This is “rebirth consciousness.”

Consciousness gives rise to name-and-form. “Name” is a mental response to your awareness. This can be a feeling, a perception, thought, etc. Likewise there may be a physical - “form” - response. Your blood pressure may go up, you may feel flushed, etc.

On the transcendent level name-and-form refers to the mind and body of a being. This is sometimes called “mentality-materiality,” or more simply, “mind and body.” Thus the rebirth consciousness is a condition for the mind and body of the being that is reborn.

The “mind and body,” then, are necessary conditions for the six senses. You cannot have senses without a mind-and-body. In Buddhism there are six senses, the sixth being the mind. The mind is a sense because it has a sense organ (eye, ear, nose, etc.), a sense object (something you see, hear, a smell, etc.), and “sense consciousness.” Without sense consciousness there cannot be a sense. A dead person has sense organs and there are sense objects, but there is no sense consciousness.

In the case of the mind sense, the sense organ is the brain, the sense object is mental formations (thoughts, perceptions, etc.), and mind consciousness is the awareness of mental formations. In the transcendent case I think you can see where this is all headed. The new human being develops senses as it grows into a material being.

With the senses as a condition there is contact. An eye sees a form, an ear hears a sound, etc.

Contact gives rise to “feeling.” This is not an emotion, the way we usually think of it. Feeling is the “feeling tone” of the sense experience: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This corresponds to the reptile brain which can only distinguish between friend, foe, and harmless.

When a feeling arises, craving arises. This is the Second Noble Truth. “Craving” is shorthand for how we respond to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences. Craving is a response to pleasant feelings. We want

them. Aversion is our response to unpleasant feelings. We don't want them. And with neutral feelings we are ambivalent. As Sharon Salzberg says, we space out.

This is how we spend our lives. We are living in a constant stream of wanting this, not wanting that, and spacing out. One of the things toward which we are working is the ability to "be in the midst of our own experience." [Sharon Salzberg] You can develop your concentration so that when feelings arise, you skip the craving, aversion, and spacing out. This is equanimity, and it is incredibly liberating. It is a taste of final liberation, nirvāṇa.

Equanimity may sound like a rather banal, neutral state, but it is not. It is highly charged. Usually the push and pull of craving and aversion weighs us down. Once we are free from that, the mind is free. There is a sense of lightness and buoyancy. Equanimity is a state free of stress.

This is one reason we are developing concentration, so we can see this happening. The untrained mind is not normally strong enough to see it. It is like trying to look at the moon through an unfocused and wobbling telescope. We have to get the mind calm and steady. Then you can catch yourself in cycles of craving, aversion, and spacing out. A concentrated mind is also more stable. It is not as easily seduced by craving.

It is possible to abandon craving, along with the stress it causes, and most people have experienced that. You feel hungry, and you want to eat. But then you get wrapped up in something else and you forget about your hunger. It may be hours later that you remember that you felt hungry, but by then you no longer feel hungry. The craving is gone. And in fact, you can train yourself not to react to feelings of hunger. You can simply watch them arise and pass away until they are gone. You can even stop them from arising at all. There will just be a slight stirring, a slight sensation, then nothing.

You may recall that the Buddha described three types of craving. There is sense craving. Then there is "craving for existence." This plays out in our

inability to attain final liberation, which ends the rounds of rebirth. You cannot end rebirth if you are attached to material existence. And there is "craving for non-existence." People who commit suicide and nihilists are sniffing around this territory, as are philosophical materialists.

Clinging comes next in the chain. Craving is something we want but don't have. Clinging is something we have and we want to hold on to. We have a new car and it gets stolen. Our distress is from clinging.

The Buddha defines four types of clinging: sense clinging, clinging to views, clinging to rites and rituals, and clinging to a doctrine of self.

Clinging to views is the characteristic of people who are very opinionated. They are ideologues. When I worked as an engineer, I called this "falling in love with your own ideas." One of the fruitful side effects of life as an engineer is it loosens your grip on opinions. The physical world, which in my case was the computer, doesn't really care about your opinions. If something doesn't work, it doesn't work, i.e., the bridge falls down.

The Buddha said this about clinging to views:

> *"When a bhikkhu adheres to his own views, holds to them tenaciously, and relinquishes them with difficulty, he dwells without respect and deference toward the Teacher, the Dhamma, and the Saṇgha, and he does not fulfill the training. Such a bhikkhu creates a dispute in the Saṇgha that leads to the harm of many people, to the unhappiness of many people, to the ruin, harm, and suffering of devas and humans."* - [AN 6.36]

I heard a teacher once paraphrase this as "opinionated people just go around annoying each other." They also annoy everyone else.

Clinging to rites and rituals had particular meaning during the Buddha's lifetime because the Vedic religion centered on rituals. (Apparently it

didn't occur to the kṣatriyas, who were about to lose their place at the top of the social food chain, that it was the brahmin priests who made their livings from those rituals.) Of course, there are plenty of people who believe in rites and rituals today.

And finally there is clinging to a doctrine of self. This would be a permanent, unchanging self. We will discuss this subject in detail later.

In the first stage of awakening, you overcome two types of clinging: clinging to rights and rituals and clinging to a doctrine of self. (The third one is eliminating doubt in the Buddha's teaching.)

The next step is translated here as “existence.” I prefer the word “becoming.” In the worldly sense, “becoming” is taking on a role. This happens a lot in families. You are the youngest child, and even when you are 70 years old you take on that role as the youngest child. You go to law school and take the bar. Working as an attorney is something you do. But then you self-identify as a lawyer. It is who you think you are. You say something like “I am a lawyer” and not “I work as a lawyer.”

Someone cuts you off in traffic. Where it becomes suffering is when it happens to “me.” That person cut “me” off. It's not just an event but something that happened to “me.” You “become” the person who was cut off. Abandoning “becoming” eliminates a great deal of suffering. You see how you turn causes and conditions and events into something they are not, and that is that they happen to “me.”

This is not, by the way, to suggest that you become reckless. It is wisdom that keeps you safe. The trick is to tease out the wisdom from the aversion.

Becoming is the process of self-identifying. The Buddha spoke about the folly of self-identification, especially because everything that happens is impermanent. Here the Buddha is speaking to his son Rāhula:

> *“Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?”*

“Suffering, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self’?”

“No, venerable sir.”

- [SN 35.12]

This is a difficult concept for most people. We all grab on to something as a form of self-identification. When I was in India, our leader asked us how in the West we identify ourselves when we first meet someone. We all agreed it was from our occupation. He told us that in India it was your family.

But what happens when those things go away or they change? What happens to “you”? If you lose your job, do you just disappear?

Our thoughts, bodies, feelings, perceptions, everything that we experience arise and pass away. So when you self-identify with any of them it is like equating yourself with an illusion. When that person cuts you off in traffic and you self-identify with the anger, where did you go when the anger passes? People usually say “I am angry.” It is like an equation: I = angry. But then the anger passes. So then what does I =? Where did you go?

And this is where you see clinging as a condition for becoming. If we don't cling to our senses, our views, or a self, it is very hard to become, to self-identify.

The Buddha described three types of becoming: sense becoming, form becoming, and formless becoming [AN 3.76]. In the transcendent model the latter two are the easiest to understand. Form becoming is the desire to acquire a physical form. As for formless becoming, in the Buddhist cosmology there are formless realms in which one can be reborn. They

correspond to the immaterial states in meditation. So it is possible to lose a desire for form rebirth but still retain a desire for formless rebirth.

Becoming is the condition for birth. In the worldly sense birth gives final, full expression to the act of becoming. “I am a lawyer.” The urge to self-identify now takes on a life of its own.

And of course in the transcendent case, birth literally means birth, the taking of form into a new body.

All of this naturally ends in aging-and-death, or as the passage says, “aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.”

The Non-linear Nature of Dependent Co-arising

The previous section describes the links in the chain of dependent co-arising, and shows how each link is a precondition for the next link. But as noted this is not a linear sequence. For example, a mental action - a thought - can lead to a verbal action - you say something - and that can lead to a physical action - you make a physical gesture. Or you have a perception - name-and-form - and consciousness arises in response to that.

Let's look at an expanded outline view of the chain. Note that the terminology here is slightly different from the previous translation:

1. **Ignorance**: not seeing things in terms of the Four Noble Truths of stress, its origination, its cessation, and the path to its cessation.
2. **Fabrication**: the process of intentionally shaping states of body and mind. These processes are of three sorts:
    1. Bodily fabrication: the in-and-out-breath.
    2. Verbal fabrication: directed thought and evaluation.
    3. Mental fabrication: feeling (feeling tones of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain) and perception (the mental

labels applied to the objects of the senses for the purpose of memory and recognition)

3. **Consciousness**: at the six sense media: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and intellect.
4. **Name-and-form**: mental and physical phenomena.
   Mental phenomena include:
   1. Feeling
   2. Perception
   3. Intention
   4. Contact
   5. Attention

   Physical phenomena include:
   6. Earth (solidity)
   7. Water (liquidity)
   8. Wind (energy and motion)
   9. Fire (warmth)
5. The **six internal sense media**: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and intellect.
6. **Contact**: at the six sense media. (*Contact* happens when a sense organ meets with a sense object - for example, the eye meets with a form - conditioning an act of *consciousness* at that sense organ. The meeting of all three - the sense organ, the object, and the act of consciousness - counts as contact.)
7. **Feeling**: based on contact at the six sense media.
8. **Craving**: for the objects of the six sense media. This craving can focus on any of the six sense media, and can take any of three forms:
   1. Sensuality-craving (craving for sensual plans and resolves).
   2. Becoming-craving (craving to assume an identity in a world of experience).
   3. Non-becoming-craving (craving for the end of an identity in a world of experience).
9. **Clinging**: passion and delight focused on the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness. This clinging can take any of four forms:
   1. Sensuality-clinging

    2. View-clinging
    3. Habit-and-practice-clinging
    4. Doctrine-of-self-clinging
10. **Becoming**: on any of three levels:
    1. The level of sensuality
    2. The level of form
    3. The level of formlessness
11. **Birth**: the assumption of an identity on any of these three levels.
12. The **aging-and-death** of that identity, with its attendant sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Shape of Suffering*]

Ṭhānissaro gives this real world example:

> *As you walk to the door of your parents' house, thinking about the situation (2b - **verbal fabrication**), you pull up memories of things your uncle has done in the past (2c - **mental fabrication**). This provokes anger, causing your breathing to become labored and tight (2a - **bodily fabrication**). This makes you uncomfortable (2c - **mental fabrication**), and you are aware of how uncomfortable you feel (3 - **consciousness**). Hormones are released into your bloodstream (4f through 4i - **form**). Without being fully aware that you are making a choice, you choose (4c - **intention**) to focus (4e - **attention**) on the **perception** (4b) of how trapped you feel in this situation. Your **consciousness** of this idea (5 and 6 - **mental contact**) feels oppressive (7 - **feeling**). You want to find a way out (8 - **craving**). At this point, you can think of a number of roles you could play in the upcoming dinner (9d and 10 - **clinging and becoming**). You might refuse to speak with your uncle, you might try to be as unobtrusive as possible to get through the dinner*

*without incident, or you might be more aggressive and confront your uncle about his behavior. You mentally take on one of these roles (11 - **birth**), but unless you keep your imaginary role actively in mind, it falls away as soon as you think of it (12 - **aging and death**). So you keep thinking about it, evaluating how your parents will react to it, how you will feel about it, and so on (2b - **verbal fabrication**). Although the stress of step (12) in this case is not great, the fact that your role has to be kept in mind and repeatedly evaluated is stressful, and you can go through many sequences of stress in this way in the course of a few moments.*

Here is a diagram of the example:

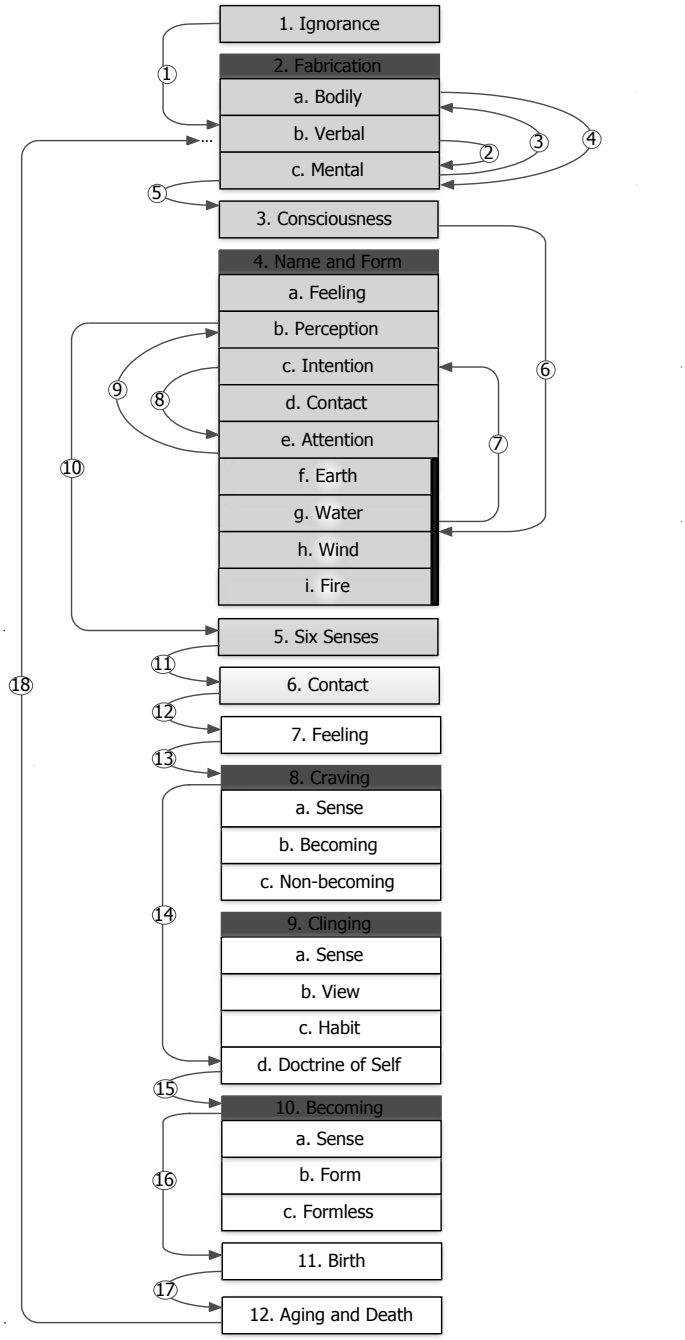

Figure: Causality Example Diagram

To further complicate this picture, the factors within the sequence can feed back into one another before completing a full sequence. This is the meaning of the specific factors and sub-factors that occur in different positions within the sequence. ***Feeling****, for instance ,*

*appears in at least four factors of the list (counting the suffering in factor 12 as a **feeling** as well). **Consciousness**, appears twice, as does **perception**. In each of these cases, a later appearance of the factor, instead of leading directly to the factor following it in the list, can be treated once more in the role it plays in an earlier appearance. (This fact accounts for the way in which the mind can spin through many cycles of thought before coming up with a definite decision to take action on a matter.) For example, a feeling of pain appearing in (7), instead of inevitably leading straight to **craving**, could be treated as a type of **mental fabrication** (2c) or as an event under **name** (4a). If, as a mental fabrication, it is subjected to further **ignorance**, that would simply compound the stress in the subsequent cycle through the causal change. A similar result would occur if, as an event under **name**, it is subjected to further inappropriate **attention** (4e), which is equivalent to **ignorance**. In terms of Scenario A, this would correspond to the point at which you feel oppressed at the prospect of going to the dinner. If you keep focusing on this feeling in an ignorant or inappropriate way, you simply compound the stress of your situation, enflaming the sense of oppression until it becomes unmanageable.*

*However, if the **feeling** in (7) is treated with **knowledge** as a type of **mental fabrication** (2c) or with **appropriate attention** (4e) - another synonym for **knowledge** - as an instance of **name**, that would redirect the sequence in a skillful way, reducing the amount of suffering and stress produced. For example, if - when you start feeling oppressed at the prospect of the upcoming dinner - you reflect on the fact that your*

labored breathing is causing unnecessary stress, you can stop to adjust your breathing so that it feels more refreshed (2a). You can think about the situation in different ways, seeing the dinner as an opportunity to develop skillful qualities of the path, such as right resolve and right speech (2b). You can remember the positive things that your uncle has done in the past, and your own personal need to think in that way (2c). You can make up your mind to do or say whatever seems most skillful in the situation (4c). In this way, you can defuse the sense of oppression and abort the particular sufferings it would have caused.

In this way, although the reappearance of ***feeling*** *at different points in dependent co-arising has the potential for compounding the problem of stress and suffering, it also opens the opportunity for a particular sequence of suffering to be alleviated. The fact that a long sequence of dependent co-arising requires the repeated occurrence of many short sequences - full or partial - similarly offers the opportunity for unraveling it at any time, simply by unraveling any one of the short sequences.*

For these reasons, it is best not to view dependent co-arising as a circle, for such a simplistic image does not do justice to the many different time frames simultaneously at work in the production of suffering. Nor does it do justice to the ways in which the complexity of dependent co-arising provides an opening for suffering to be brought to an end. A better image would be to view dependent co-arising as a complex interplay of many feedback loops that, if approached with ignorance, can produce compounded suffering or, if approached with knowledge,

create repeated opportunities to redirect the sequence and dampen the experience of suffering or stress.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Shape of Suffering*]

There are three main points here:

1. You see how the mind spins out of control. The untrained mind gets into a feedback loop, like the speaker that is too close to the microphone. You have had this experience with craving. You really want something and then you want it more and more until it becomes an obsession. Then there is clinging. You hold dearly onto something. And there is aversion, fear, anxiety, and depression. It is also true of confusion, where you don't know what to do about something, and become increasingly desperate.
2. The antidote is to a) see what is happening and then b) break the cycle. The classic way to do this is to bring your attention back to the breath. This acts like a shock absorber for the spinning mind. It slows everything down and dampens the cycle. Mettā is the antidote for aversive mind states.
3. It is important to remember this teaching - keep it in mind - so that you can see links in the chain when they manifest.

This is why the breath is such a good meditation object. It is always available. And using the 80-20 rule, where 20% of your attention is on the breath, you can use it while you are doing anything, even brain surgery.

This may seem overwhelming. It is a lot to remember, a lot to "keep in mind." I have two suggestions. The first suggestion is to determine which link in the chain you can see most easily and work with that one. That might be becoming, or craving, or clinging, but it could be any one.

The other suggestion is to keep coming back to this topic. After a while you will remember most of the chain, at least the links that you can see most clearly.

The Reverse Chain of Dependent Co-arising

> *"Thus, bhikkhus, with ignorance as proximate cause, volitional formations [come to be]; with volitional formations as proximate cause, consciousness; with consciousness as proximate cause, name-and-form; with name-and-form as proximate cause, the six sense bases; with the six sense bases as proximate cause, contact; with contact as proximate cause, feeling; with feeling as proximate cause, craving; with craving as proximate cause, clinging; with clinging as proximate cause, existence; with existence as proximate cause, birth; with birth as proximate cause, suffering; with suffering as proximate cause, faith; with faith as proximate cause, gladness; with gladness as proximate cause, rapture; with rapture as proximate cause, tranquility; with tranquility as proximate cause, happiness; with happiness as proximate cause, concentration; with concentration as proximate cause, the knowledge and vision of things as they really are; with the knowledge and vision of things as they really are as proximate cause, revulsion; with revulsion as proximate cause, dispassion; with dispassion as proximate cause, liberation; with liberation as proximate cause, the knowledge of destruction."* - [SN 12.23]

In this rather dense quote, the Buddha offers us a way out of suffering. Usually suffering leads to confusion. But in this case suffering leads to faith:

1. **Suffering**: One is conscious of suffering so the inevitable progression of birth, aging and death is not mindless. This

awareness allows the emergence of a solution. This is the First Noble Truth, that suffering is to be understood.

2. **Faith**: This is the first glimpse that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Faith is needed at this juncture because it is all you have to rely on.
3. **Joy**: The first result of faith is an emotional lightening. This is the pure happiness that arises from devotional practice.
4. **Rapture**: The intensification of that joy together with a deepening unification of mind gives rise to rapture experiences.
5. **Tranquility**: This is the deep meditative peace that is on the other side of joy and rapture.
6. **Bliss**: This is the subtle happiness of the calmed and purified mind, and the bliss of practicing the path.
7. **Concentration**: This is the fully unified state of mind. This mind is wieldy and malleable, fit to do the work of insight.
8. **Knowledge and Vision of Things as They Are**: This is the direct seeing that is the product of insight. Direct understanding of mind and body, rise and fall, and the three characteristics of suffering, impermanence, and not-self.
9. **Disenchantment**: Having seen things in their real nature one becomes dis-enchanted with conventional existence, like one awakening from a magic spell. Having seen reality clearly, one is no longer fooled thereby.
10. **Dispassion**: Having seen the reality of saṃsāra clearly in the previous stages, one loses interest in all objects of desire.
11. **Liberation**: Without the motive force of desire for becoming, the wheel is broken and saṃsāra transcended. This is the realization of nibbāna, the ultimate human experience.
12. **Knowledge of Destruction of the Cankers**: This is the enjoyment of the fruit, an end to all suffering and defilement.

(Based on the exposition by Ajahn Punnadhammo, Arrow River Hermitage, Internet search: "dependent origination arrow river")

Here things begin to turn at suffering. Instead of continuing to chase after sense pleasures, we look for a better way. This is what the Buddha did.

He examined his luxurious life and saw that it was ultimately unsatisfying. That is when he left home to become a spiritual seeker. He didn't know that there was an answer, but he had faith that there was something better.

Notice how positive these five factors are: joy, rapture, tranquility, bliss, and concentration. Meditation should be a pleasant undertaking. Of course, meditation requires effort and it isn't always easy. But the effort should be cultivating positive mind states. This is the sense of well-being that we are trying to establish. This provides the foundation for insight. A concentrated, happy mind can be with difficult mind states more easily because it does not get wrapped up in them. The difficult mind states arise in a field of contentment.

Some teachers say that meditation is not about developing mind states. But most of the path *is* about developing wholesome mind states and abandoning unwholesome mind states. We have already seen the Buddha say this in his description of the Four Right Exertions.

As your concentration improves, you see how unsatisfying it is to chase after sense pleasures. This leads to dispassion. You lose interest in sense pleasures. You see how sense pleasures are running your life. Once you see the futility of chasing after sense pleasures, they lose their grip on you. You've done things like eating countless times, but you still get hungry. Eating never has an end that is satisfying. It is an addiction. How strong that addiction is depends on your mind state at the moment it arises.

You still have to eat, of course, and you may still have preferences. But not eating starts to become no big deal, and you lose interest in the optional sense pleasures. You can be happy with a good meal, happy with a bad meal, happy with no meal.

Attaining Final Liberation - Nirvāṇa

The teaching of dependent origination also shows how

the round of existence can be broken. With the arising of true knowledge, full penetration of the Four Noble Truths, ignorance is eradicated. Consequently the mind no longer indulges in craving and clinging, action loses its potential to generate rebirth, and deprived thus of its fuel, the round comes to an end. This marks the goal of the teaching signaled by the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering.

- [Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Majjhima Nikāya*, Introduction]

The ability to see dependent co-arising as dependent co-arising is a first step in developing the clear knowledge that brings ignorance to an end.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Shape of Suffering*]

The links of dependent co-arising will appear in your meditation as your concentration improves. Strong concentration has two main effects. The first is that your meditation will become more pleasant, tranquil, and serene. It will be more enjoyable.

The second is that you will see the process of dependent co-arising. Your concentration, bound with knowledge of right view, penetrates the chain. You see becoming; you see craving; you see clinging; you see feelings; you see the process of fabrication. And instead of these habitual patterns running amok, you begin picking them off at mid-stream.

When the skills appropriate to the Noble Eightfold Path are consistently and masterfully applied to dependent co-arising, they can cause the entire system of suffering and its causes to collapse.

This is because this knowledge brings about a form of

vision that inclines neither to becoming nor to non-becoming. This mode of vision functions as a resonance in that it causes the many feedback loops connected with becoming or non-becoming to become undefined. If applied consistently enough, this mode of vision can have a cascading effect, causing all the feedback loops in dependent co-arising to become undefined, thus bringing about the collapse of the entire system.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Shape of Suffering*]

6. The Three Characteristics

All conditioned phenomena have three characteristics. In Pāli these terms are anicca, dukkha, and anattā, that is, that all phenomena are 1) impermanent/inconstant/unreliable, 2) suffering/stressful, and 3) non-self.

Let's start with the standard formula. Here is how the Buddha describes them in the *Majjhima Nikāya*:

> *"Bhikkhus, what do you think? Is material form permanent or impermanent?"*
>
> *"Impermanent, venerable sir."*
>
> *"Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?"*
>
> *"Suffering, venerable sir."*
>
> *"Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self'?"*
>
> *"No, venerable sir."*
>
> *"Bhikkhus, what do you think? Is feeling...Is perception... Are formations...Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?"*
>
> *"Impermanent, venerable sir."*
>
> *"Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?"*

“Suffering, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self’?”

“No, venerable sir.” - [MN 22.26-27]

Let's take a look at what he means.

Anicca: Impermanence

“Bhikkhus, you may well acquire that possession that is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and that might endure as long as eternity. But do you see any such possession, bhikkhus?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Good, bhikkhus. I too do not see any possession that is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and that might endure as long as eternity.” - [MN 22.22]

The Pāli term “anicca” is usually translated as “impermanence,” but that does not capture the essence of the word. Most people, after modest reflection, can see that everything is impermanent. Even the universe itself will collapse, so that does not leave much of a future for the corner drug store. But given the time frame, very few people worry about that. On a much shorter time frame, people are not even concerned with their own mortality until it becomes a reality. Sometimes not even then.

The Buddha's teachings on this topic are subtle. As we have seen, we live in a causal universe, a world of causes and conditions, not things. Life is like the ocean, rising and falling moment by moment. But we are not mere pawns in a relentless sea of change. Our choices shape our

experience. Our past karma is like the hand we are dealt in poker; our present karma - our present choice - is how we play that hand. So the first step is to make skillful choices. We shape our experience, not just become victims to it. Thus the teachings on virtue, concentration, and wisdom help us to fabricate a better outcome.

The law of impermanence has good news and bad news. The good news is that impermanence is empowering. If our lives were pre-determined, or controlled by some higher power, or simply random and chaotic, there would be nothing we can do to make them better.

But in a world of causes and conditions, what we do matters. We shape our experience of the present, and we work toward a brighter future by making wise choices. Of course, that is not to deny the fruition of past karma or the uncontrollable circumstances like the weather or shifting tectonic plates. But one of the things that practice teaches us is not to worry about those things. We can't do anything about them, but we can choose how to respond to them, and that is where we put our energy. You are a pilot in a plane. You can't control the weather, but you can control the plane.

We shape both the events of our lives and how we experience those events. We shape the events of our lives by being virtuous. We shape our experience of those events by cultivating a more skillful mind, one that is happy, contented, and equanimous.

We have already discussed how the practice of virtue affects our experience of the present and the future. Our perceptions can be healthier, more skillful, and more pleasant. Even our experience of feelings as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral change. When I first took up cycling and I was climbing a hill, my quadriceps muscles would hurt. Cyclists call this “quad burn.” It was unpleasant. But as I rode more, I experienced the quad burn as pleasant. Thus the same sensations were unpleasant at one time and pleasant at a different time.

A simpler example is food. There are foods that we like as children and

don't like as adults. The converse is also true. The food is the same, but our experience of it changes.

Some people say that you can experience the present moment in a way that is divorced from any pre-conditioning. This is sometimes called "bare attention." This is not possible. Our experience of the present moment is always conditioned. The only thing that is unconditioned is nirvāṇa. This is why two people can be in the same circumstances but experience it in two different ways.

Some years ago I had a job working with high-resolution video boards for computers. That is when people still used film in cameras, and a hot topic was why the color in photographs did not look like the color in real objects. Kodak spent a lot of time trying to figure this out. It turned out that the reason had nothing to do with film technology. When you look at a fire engine, the mind knows the context, and it applies certain rules to what you see. But when you look at a photograph of a fire engine, the mind knows that it is looking at a picture, and it applies different rules. Thus, it is technically impossible to render the fire engine in the same way in a photograph as in real life, unless you can fool the mind into thinking it is looking at a real fire engine.

Our experience of the present moment is always conditioned by our mind, but that conditioning is also impermanent and constantly changing. That change can happen in a negative or a positive way. As people get older they sometimes become bitter and angry, and this makes their experience of the present moment more unpleasant and less skillful. One of the things that we are trying to do is develop the mind in a positive and more skillful way.

While a belief in rebirth is not necessary to benefit from the Buddha's teachings, it is very helpful in some circumstances. Sometimes our life situation is such that the immediate future looks pretty bleak. There are people who are loving and compassionate even in the most desperate circumstances. In concentration camps in Nazi Germany there were people who comforted others even as they were dying. In that type of

situation it is helpful to have an understanding of the bigger picture and the ultimate value of virtue and a good heart.

The bad news about impermanence is that while we can improve our experience of the present moment, and we can improve the odds of being happy and useful, even that is inconstant and unreliable. Planes crash. Tectonic plates move. Wars are fought. It is an uncertain world. So that is why ultimately we want to go beyond conditioned existence.

We begin by learning how to develop better causes and conditions for better results. And then we get to the place where our happiness is unconditioned, where it is certain.

Dukkha: Suffering/Stress

> *"Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering."* - [MN 56.11]

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu says that when he was in Thailand, someone complained to him that Buddhists are always talking about suffering. He said to Ṭhānissaro, "I don't suffer." So Ṭhānissaro said to him, "Well, do you have stress in your life?" The man said, well, oh, yeah, I have a lot of stress in my life. So Ṭhānissaro prefers the word "stress" to "suffering." Everyone can relate to stress.

Buddhism gets a reputation for being pessimistic because of the First Noble Truth. But notice how the Buddha described suffering. He did not say that life is suffering. This is a common misunderstanding. He listed specific types of suffering. Birth is suffering. Death is suffering. Union with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what we want is suffering. The five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering. He gave

us examples of suffering, an inventory. He never actually defined the term.

This is quite a hot button issue. In his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Pope John Paul II said:

> *"...the Buddhist tradition and the methods deriving from it have an almost exclusively negative soteriology (doctrine of salvation)."*

Ajahn Punnadhammo notes that this belief is not just a problem with non-Buddhists:

> *This is not a criticism limited to the Catholics, either. Many who are in partial sympathy with Buddhist ideas voice similar objections. For instance, on a web-site called "A Call for a New Buddhism" we find the following;*
>
> *1) Life is suffering. Is human life essentially painful from the moment of birth to the moment of death? Even ordinary life can be full of fun, adventure, friends, romance, good food, music and art. In many ways Buddhism has become an anti-life religion that appeals to those who always see the glass half empty rather than half full. Why should we deny the fact that life can be an enjoyable adventure and not just a pitiful veil of tears?*
>
> - [Ajahn Punnadhammo, "Is Buddhism Negative?"]

I love his response:

> *On one occasion someone [asked me] why Buddhists only talk about suffering and I couldn't resist replying that that isn't true, we also talk about grief, pain, lamentation, misery and despair.*

- [Ajahn Punnadhammo]

Once he pries his tongue out of his cheek, Ajahn Punnadhammo goes on to say:

> *The objection comes primarily from a reading of the First Noble Truth (in translation) as "Life is suffering." Part of the problem is that old bug-bear, translation. I've said it before, and I'll no doubt say it again, languages are not perfectly isomorphic. Pāli does not completely map into English on a word for word basis. The Pāli word translated as "suffering" is "dukkha" which is much broader than the English word. In some contexts, suffering works well enough but the problem comes when we encounter the teaching that all conditioned experience is dukkha and translate that as suffering. A poke in the eye with a sharp stick is both suffering and dukkha. A delicious slice of rhubarb pie is dukkha but it certainly isn't suffering.*
>
> *So what exactly is dukkha then? It is a universal characteristic of all conditioned phenomena experienced with the physical senses or the mind. It points to that aspect shared by all such experience as being imperfect, unsatisfactory, in some way incomplete or provisional. Some experiences can give us joy, but no experience can be completely sufficient. There is never enough rhubarb pie.*
>
> - [Ajahn Punnadhammo]

In other words, there are limits to what sense pleasures can provide.

My experience with the practice is that I actually enjoy sense pleasures more because there is no clinging or craving getting in the way. I live in New Mexico where there are breathtaking vistas, and I can simply enjoy

them in the moment. And when the moment passes, it passes, free from the angst of wanting more, or wanting it again and again and again.

I have used the term “five aggregates” without defining it, so here is a good time to do that, especially since, as the Buddha says here, the “five aggregates subject to clinging”are suffering.

According to the Buddha, there are five aspects to conditioned human experience:

1. **The body**
2. **Feelings** - the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience of the senses
3. **Perception** - how we perceive, identify, or name our experience
4. **Mental fabrications** - our thoughts and emotions
5. **Consciousness** - our awareness of our experience

In fact, these five aggregates can conflate to just two: mind and body.

These aspects of our experience are, of course, inconstant and unreliable (anicca). They change from moment to moment. It is our clinging to these inconstant, unreliable processes that causes stress.

When we experience pleasant sensations, we want to hold on to them. When we don't experience pleasant sensations, we seek them out. When we experience unpleasant sensations, we want them to go away. When we do not experience unpleasant sensations, we want to avoid them. This is the moment-by-moment struggle that we fight within ourselves. We are chasing sense pleasures around like mercury on a lab table.

Curiously, psychologists tell us that when we seek sense pleasures but are never satisfied, we pursue them even harder. It is as if pounding our head on the table causes pain, so if we just pound a little harder the pain will stop.

> *What most of us experience when it comes to addiction is a pattern of continually seeking more of what it is we*

> *don't really want and, therefore, never being fully satisfied. And as long as we are never satisfied, we continue to seek more, while our real needs are never being met.*
>
> - [Sally Erickson, *What A Way To Go: Life at the End of Empire*]

You see this with people and money. Someone buys something, and for a while that makes them happy. But very quickly that happiness fades. So they buy something else. The pattern repeats itself. Wash, rinse, repeat. People can go on for their entire lives thinking that if they just keep buying things, if they can just buy more and more expensive things, they will be happy.

The studies of people who win the lottery are instructive. The people who win lotteries and are the happiest are the people who make the fewest changes in their lives. They do not quit their jobs. They do not spend enormous amounts of money on toys. They may pay off some debts and buy a few things, but they make relatively few changes to their lives. This would indicate that their lives were reasonably satisfying before they won the lottery, so they did not see that suddenly having money was going to move their lives from the "unhappy" column into the "happy" column.

(This is not, by the way, to glorify poverty. If you do not have enough money to pay for the essentials in life, that is a problem. But as a friend of mine used to say, if you have enough money to live on, that only solves one problem in your life.)

Fortunately, the Buddha had a better idea. We start by cultivating the pleasure born of seclusion. This is, at least, a healthier way of experiencing pleasure. No one has ever committed a crime due to serenity. And then, with patience and persistence, we go beyond that to nirvāṇa, the unconditioned.

Our experience of dukkha is universal. It is one of the things that binds us together as beings. This extends to all beings, not just humans. One of the iconic stories in Buddhism speaks to this shared experience. It is the story of Kisa Gotami and the mustard seed.

Kisa Gotami had an only son, and he died. In her grief she carried the dead child to all her neighbors, asking them for medicine, and the people said: "She has lost her senses. The boy is dead." At length Kisa Gotami met a man who replied to her request: "I cannot give [you] medicine for [your] child, but I know a physician who can." The girl said: "Pray tell me, sir; who is it?" And the man replied: "Go to Sakyamuni, the Buddha."

Kisa Gotami repaired to the Buddha and cried: "Lord and Master, give me the medicine that will cure my boy." The Buddha answered: "I want a handful of mustard-seed." And when the girl in her joy promised to procure it, the Buddha added: "The mustard-seed must be taken from a house where no one has lost a child, husband, parent, or friend." Poor Kisa Gotami now went from house to house, and the people pitied her and said: "Here is mustard-seed; take it!" But when she asked, "Did a son or daughter, a father or mother, die in your family?" They answered her: "Alas the living are few, but the dead are many. Do not remind us of our deepest grief." And there was no house but some beloved one had died in it.

Kisa Gotami became weary and hopeless, and sat down at the wayside, watching the lights of the city, as they flickered up and were extinguished again. At last the darkness of the night reigned everywhere. And she considered the fate of [people], that their lives flicker up and are extinguished. And she thought to herself: "How

selfish I am in my grief! Death is common to all; yet in this valley of desolation there is a path that leads him to immortality who has surrendered all selfishness." Putting away the selfishness of her affection for her child, Kisa Gotami had the dead body buried in the forest. Returning to the Buddha, she took refuge in him and found comfort in the Dharma, which is a balm that will soothe all the pains of our troubled hearts.

The Buddha said: "The life of mortals in this world is troubled and brief and combined with pain. For there is not any means by which those that have been born can avoid dying; after reaching old age there is death; of such a nature are living beings. As ripe fruits are early in danger of falling, so mortals when born are always in danger of death. As all earthen vessels made by the potter end in being broken, so is the life of mortals. Both young and adult, both those who are fools and those who are wise, all fall into the power of death; all are subject to death.

"Of those who, overcome by death, depart from life, a father cannot save his son, nor kinsmen their relations. Mark I while relatives are looking on and lamenting deeply, one by one mortals are carried off, like an ox that is led to the slaughter. So the world is afflicted with death and decay, therefore the wise do not grieve, knowing the terms of the world. In whatever manner people think a thing will come to pass, it is often different when it happens, and great is the disappointment; see, such are the terms of the world.

"Not from weeping nor from grieving will any one obtain

peace of mind; on the contrary, his pain will be the greater and his body will suffer. He will make himself sick and pale, yet the dead are not saved by his lamentation. People pass away, and their fate after death will be according to their deeds. If a [person] lives a hundred years, or even more, [they] will at last be separated from the company of relatives, and leave the life of this world. He who seeks peace should draw out the arrow of lamentation, and complaint, and grief. He who has drawn out the arrow and has become composed will obtain peace of mind; he who has overcome all sorrow will become free from sorrow, and be blessed." - [ThigA 10.1]

Anattā: Non-self

Next comes one of the most misunderstood teachings of the Buddha, the teachings on "anattā," or "not self."

Let's start with what anattā is not. It is not nihilism. You hear this so often in Buddhist circles that it has become a sort of mystical truism.

The Buddha never answered the question of whether there is a soul or a self. Rather he consistently declared this is a conceptual, abstract topic that is of no value. It only serves as a distraction in the search for an end to suffering:

"Here, bhikkhus, an untaught ordinary person, who has no regard for noble ones and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, who has no regard for true men and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, does not understand what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, he attends to those things unfit for attention and he does not attend to those things fit for attention.

“This is how he attends unwisely: ‘Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future?’ Or else he is inwardly perplexed about the present thus: ‘Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?’” - [MN 2.6-7]

In this passage, the Buddha described speculations about the self in the past. In the next passage, he described speculation about the self in the future:

“Bhikkhus, there are some recluses and brahmins who speculate about the future and hold views about the future, who assert various doctrinal propositions concerning the future. (1) Some assert thus: ‘The self is percipient and unimpaired after death.’ (2) Some assert thus: ‘The self is non-percipient and unimpaired after death.’ (3) Some assert thus: ‘The self is neither percipient nor non-percipient and unimpaired after death.’ (4) Or they describe the annihilation, destruction, and extermination of an existing being [at death].” - [MN 102.2]

What he did say is that we suffer because we self-identify with the five aggregates of clinging. Let's look again at the beginning quote on the Three Characteristics:

“Bhikkhus, what do you think? Is material form permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?”

“Suffering, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self’?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Bhikkhus, what do you think? Is feeling… Is perception… Are formations… Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?”

“Suffering, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self’?”

“No, venerable sir.” - [MN 22.26-27]

If you substitute the words “inconstant and unreliable” for the word “impermanent” you can see how the meaning of the teaching becomes clear.

There are a couple of points here. First, the Buddha did not say that the five aggregates are the source of suffering. It is our clinging to them that is the problem. On the contrary, the skillful use of the five aggregates is part of the solution to our problem. He then went on to say that anything that is inconstant and unreliable will lead to suffering, just like an old car or untrustworthy romance.

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu goes on to say this:

> *The self strategy that the Buddha recommends using along the path derives from the question at the basis of discernment: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" This question contains two ideas of self. The first is the idea of the self as agent, the producer of happiness; the second is the idea of the self as the consumer of happiness. When the question says, "What, when I do it," the "I" here in "I do it" is the self as producer. The "my" in "my long-term welfare and happiness" is the self as consumer of happiness.*
>
> - [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Selves and Not-self*]

A healthy attitude toward one's self is a good strategy. Being addicted to and self-identifying with inconstant and unreliable processes is not a good strategy. Developing virtue, concentration, and wisdom is a good strategy. The issue of whether there is a self is irrelevant, and it is a hindrance to awakening. Don't worry; get happy.

Another way that the Buddha showed the Three Characteristics was by relating them to sense pleasures:

> *"Bhikkhus, sensual pleasures are impermanent, hollow, false, deceptive; they are illusory, the prattle of fools. Sensual pleasures here and now and sensual pleasures in lives to come, sensual perceptions here and now and sensual perceptions in lives to come-both alike are Māra's realm, Māra's domain, Māra's bait, Māra's hunting ground. On account of them, these evil unwholesome mental states such as covetousness, ill will, and presumption arise, and they constitute an obstruction to a noble disciple in training here."* - [MN 106.2]

(Note: “Māra” represents temptation.)

What is impermanent cannot be “regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self.’” He said this more explicitly elsewhere:

> *“Now there comes a time when the water element is disturbed and then the external earth element vanishes When even this external earth element, great as it is, is seen to be impermanent, subject to destruction, disappearance, and change¸ what of this body, which is clung to by craving and lasts but a while? There can be no considering that as ‘I’ or ‘mine’ or ‘I am.’”* - [MN 28.7]

Thus, the Buddha made two points here. One is particularly interesting from a scientific standpoint and that is that the earth itself is impermanent. Given the era that is an extraordinary statement. The second point is that if the body is the “self” what happens when the body dies? The only way to reconcile the body as the “self” is to adopt a nihilistic point of view, that when the body dies existence ends for that being. There is no continuation. This has already been summarily rejected. The same is true for the other four aggregates, all of which are also impermanent.

But the most important issue is the clinging. We have already seen this in the context of dependent co-arising. And here the clinging is tightly bound with becoming. We self-identify with constantly changing phenomena. If we can put down the clinging then we can put down becoming, and we can save ourselves a lot of grief.

The Buddha is not making a metaphysical statement about whether we exist or do not exist or both exist and not exist or neither exist or not exist. It is about “how” not “what.” He is describing the process whereby we create suffering for ourselves and how our self-identification with the aggregates causes so much mischief in the world. When we self-identify with gender, race, nationality, religion, profession, even being human, we cause a lot of trouble.

A useful tool in our practice is to see the process of becoming whereby one self-identifies with the processes of body and mind.

A good strategy for the skillful pursuit of happiness is to develop dispassion for sense pleasures, replacing them with the pleasure born of seclusion. While this type of pleasure is still conditioned, it is much more skillful and less prone to mischief.

7. What the Teaching is Not

The very first discourse in the Pāli Canon is about wrong view. It is the "Brahmajāla Sutta: The Supreme Net" [DN 1]. It is subtitled "What the Teaching is Not."

In exhaustive fashion the Buddha itemized 62 wrong views. It is helpful to remember the philosophical environment of the times. On one side of the equation were the brahmins. They were the mainstream religion in India. Brahmanism may have been an amalgamation of the religion that Aryans brought with them when they came to India and the highly-decentralized religion of the Indus River civilization of northwestern India. The Indus River civilization may have added meditation and reincarnation to this equation, and the Aryans contributed a belief in ritual, as well as the hereditary Varṇa class system.

On the other side of the equation were the samaṇas. They were religious seekers and philosophers who rejected Brahmanism. Their beliefs were extremely varied. They ranged from skeptics who did not believe it was possible to truly know anything, to mono-theists, poly-theists, philosophical materialists, and so on. So the religious territory of ancient India was extremely varied.

This is what the Buddha was up against. Through considerable effort he was able to see into the transcendent, ultimate nature of reality, and it was not like anything that had been described before. What the Buddha saw was not a universe of things but of processes. We have already examined his simplest formulation of this:

> *"Here, Ānanda, a bhikkhu knows thus: 'When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with*

the cessation of this, that ceases.'" - [MN 115.11]

What the Buddha saw was something akin to a superset of modern science. It is a system of causes and effects, more like the ocean than a rock. Except for nirvāṇa, nothing is static and unchanging. Further, these processes are not deterministic, but probabilistic. You cannot know precisely what will happen. You can only know that there are certain possibilities. What actually happens depends on complex interactions.

To the scientific view of processes, he added the element of ethical behavior. Wholesome actions have wholesome effects, and unwholeseome actions have unwholesome effects:

> *"These worthy beings who were ill conducted in body, speech, and mind, revilers of noble ones, wrong in their views, giving effect to wrong view in their actions, on the dissolution of the body, after death, have reappeared in a state of deprivation, in a bad destination, in perdition, even in hell; but these worthy beings who were well conducted in body, speech, and mind, not revilers of noble ones, right in their views, giving effect to right view in their actions, on the dissolution of the body, after death, have reappeared in a good destination, even in the heavenly world."* - [MN 51.25]

This is a wonderful passage. Here the Buddha combines a number of qualities that affect our future:

1. Conduct of body, speech, and mind.
2. The treatment of noble ones.
3. Right or wrong views.
4. How those views "give effect in actions."

I think an especially noteworthy part of this passage is the importance that the Buddha placed on respect for noble ones. I have heard some teachers be, I think, pretty casual in their criticism of the Buddha. For

example, I recently heard someone give a Dharma talk in which she disparaged the "Buddha's lists." Her poor understanding of the Dharma led to that unfortunate and ill-informed statement. I think you want to be careful about that kind of criticism, especially when it comes from ignorance.

So it is not just our conduct that determines a future destination. It is 1) our conduct along with 2) our respect for noble ones, 3) the skill of our views, and 4) how those views affect our actions. In a certain sense he is upping the ante over simply paying attention to ethical conduct. We need more than just good behavior. And he makes it pretty clear what the consequences are. This is serious business.

In the Buddha's system of training, our understanding is an iterative process. We begin by studying the Buddha's teachings and reflecting on them. Then we put them into practice. We test them and see what happens. What are the results of more skillful behavior? We practice virtue, which in the Noble Eightfold Path is right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Then we see what effect this has on our minds and on our lives.

We meditate, putting into practice right energy, right mindfulness, and right concentration. We watch how our minds work. We begin to see how we create our own suffering, and how understanding suffering enables us to escape it.

This iterative process of study and practice leads to seeing into and experiencing right view for ourselves. We do not have to take someone else's opinion on how life works, even the Buddha's. It becomes a direct, personal experience.

This is why right view is so important in the Buddha's system of training. If we become locked into a wrong view, this keeps us from evolving into greater happiness, greater skill, and less suffering. And it most certainly will keep us from the ultimate prize, which is complete freedom.

The Buddha was particularly harsh on bhikkhus who espoused wrong

views. In the "Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta: The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving" [MN 38], the monk Sāti espoused the view that a permanent consciousness travels through the rounds of rebirth:

> *"…As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is this same consciousness that runs and wanders through the round of rebirths, not another."*
>
> *"What is that consciousness, Sāti?"*
>
> *"Venerable sir, it is that which speaks and feels and experiences here and there the result of good and bad actions."*
>
> *"Misguided man, to whom have you ever known me to teach the Dhamma in that way? Misguided man, have I not stated in many ways consciousness to be dependently arisen, since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness? But you, misguided man, have misrepresented us by your wrong grasp and injured yourself and stored up much demerit; for this will lead to your harm and suffering for a long time."* - [MN 38.5]

This is a cautionary note to people who distort the Buddha's teachings. Of course, we all have different levels of understanding. And understanding something one way and then later having a deeper and clearer understanding is part of the process. But imposing your own views and opinions into Buddhadharma can be quite destructive. We have to treat our understanding with great care. And we can start, then, with the Brahmajāla Sutta.

I am not going to go through all 62 types of wrong view. For that I encourage you to read the sutta. Some of the types are quite subtly different. But I do want to touch on some of the highlights, as least the ones that strike me as particularly interesting.

The Canon gives so many little details into life at that time, and the Brahmajāla Sutta is no exception. It begins with the Buddha traveling around India with a group of his monks. His group is being followed by a samaṇa named "Suppiya" and Suppiya's student "Brahmadatta." Suppiya and Brahmadatta disagree about the Buddha's teaching:

> *And the wanderer Suppiya was also travelling on that road with his pupil the youth Brahmadatta. And Suppiya was finding fault in all sorts of ways with the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṇgha, whereas his pupil Brahmadatta was speaking in various ways in their praise.* - [DN 1.1]

What follows is another interesting little tidbit. The Buddha often said that what he taught was not supposed to be a topic for debate. It is not a philosophy or religion. It is a training, a way to see for yourself the ultimate, transcendent truth about life, and a way to be free from suffering and stress. This is inextricably bound to being of greater service to others, for, as the Buddha pointed out, it is not possible to help others overcome their defilements if you have not freed yourself of them as well:

> *"Cunda, that one who is himself sinking in the mud should pull out another who is sinking in the mud is impossible; that one who is not himself sinking in the mud should pull out another who is sinking in the mud is possible. That one who is himself untamed, undisciplined, [with defilements] unextinguished, should tame another, discipline him, and help extinguish [his defilements] is impossible; that one who is himself tamed, disciplined, [with defilements] extinguished, should tame another, discipline him, and help extinguish [his defilements] is possible."* - [MN 8.16]

Along these lines, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu tells this story:

"We've had people – refugees – from Zen centers coming here, where they are told that they are supposed to practice without any sense of hoping to gain for anything at all. It drives them crazy, so they come here and they think, well, at least we are Theravada, we can be selfish, just practice for ourselves. But it doesn't work here, either. But we do gain, but other people gain as well, and it's good to see that larger perspective, to hold that larger perspective in mind."

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "Visakha Puja – True Homage"]

When the Buddha became aware of how Suppiya was disparaging him, he gathered his monks and said this:

"Monks, if anyone should speak in disparagement of me, of the Dhamma or of the Saṇgha, you should not be angry, resentful or upset on that account. If you were to be angry or displeased at such disparagement, that would only be a hindrance to you. For if others disparage me, the Dhamma or the Saṇgha, and you are angry or displeased, can you recognise whether what they say is right or not?"

"No, Lord."

"If others disparage me, the Dhamma or the Saṇgha, then you must explain what is incorrect as being incorrect, saying: 'That is incorrect, that is false, that is not our way, that is not found among us.'" - [DN 1.5]

The Buddha then went on to give this detailed Dharma talk on the topic of wrong views, "what the teaching is not." It begins with a section on morality which I will skip other than to say that the Buddha was relentless in teaching the importance of moral behavior. I recently heard

a Buddhist monk say that some schools of Buddhism think that you can do an "end run around karma." The Buddha never gave any indication that you can behave in an immoral way and avoid the consequences of that behavior. And I, for one, would not want to test the hypothesis that you can get away with breaking the precepts.

Then the Buddha went into the topic that we are interested in here. It is called "The Sixty-Two Kinds of Wrong Views."

Eternalism

The first four kinds of wrong view are a belief in eternalism, a belief in an eternal self. This self is born and reborn endlessly throughout infinite time. The four variations of this wrong view are because of how people came to believe them. In the first three modes, those persons were able to attain high levels of meditative concentration. This enabled them to see into their past lives. But because they were unable to fully penetrate the meaning of those past lives, they came to the wrong conclusion that this is how existence is forevermore. They did not see, as the Buddha did, the escape from the rounds of rebirth.

In the fourth mode, the proponent of this view did not see it by meditative achievement, but they used logic and reason:

> *"Here a certain ascetic or brahmin is a logician, a reasoner. Hammering it out by reason, following his own line of thought, he argues: 'The self and the world are eternal, barren like a mountain-peak, set firmly as a post. These beings rush round, circulate, pass away and re-arise, but this remains for ever.'"* - [MN 1.1.34]

Partly Eternalistic and Partly Non-Eternalist

The first time that I read this next section, it really made me stop and reflect on this passage. For this section gives a Buddhist explanation for theism, a belief in an all-powerful, omniscient, creator God.

As some background, you may know that Buddhism and Hinduism have long held a cyclical view of the universe. The Canon describes the life of the universe in a way that is very close to modern science. In this cyclical view, there is a "big bang" (in modern terms), followed by expansion of the universe. Then the universe contracts, and we start all over again. In the texts this amount of time – a lifetime of the universe - is called a "kalpa."

An obvious problem occurs in this model in that if beings are born and reborn, what happens to all the beings that would normally be destined for the human realm during the transition? (Note that we would call it the human realm. The Buddhist cosmology also accounts for other world systems.) According to the Brahmajāla Sutta, those beings go into a temporary holding area called the "Abhassara Brāhma world":

> *"There comes a time, monks, sooner or later after a long period, when this world contracts. At a time of contraction, beings are mostly reborn in the Abhassara Brahmā world. And there they dwell, mind-made, feeding on delight, self-luminous, moving through the air, glorious — and they stay like that for a very long time."* - [DN 1.2.2]

When the universe begins to expand again, one of the beings in the Abhassara Brahmā world descends into the Brahmā realm, presumably because that being has a lot of good karma. In the Buddhist cosmology (see Appendix C) the Brahmā realm is one of the higher-level heavens. This being appears spontaneously, and it appears alone.

After a while this being – the new Brahmā – gets lonely and begins to wish for companions. And right on cue, some other beings appear in the Brahmā realm:

“Then in this being who has been alone for so long there arises unrest, discontent and worry, and he thinks: “Oh, if only some other beings would come here!” And other beings, from exhaustion of their life-span or of their merits, fall from the Abhassara world and arise in the Brahmā palace as companions for this being. And there they dwell, mind-made... and they stay like that for a very long time.” - [DN 1.2.4]

Because Brahmā wished for them, he (or she or it) thinks that he has created them. This leads Brahmā to believe that he is the Creator. The other beings also believe that he is the Creator, and when some of them are subsequently reborn in the human realm, voila, you have an argument for a creator God:

“And then, monks, that being who first arose there thinks: ‘I am Brahma, the Great Brahma, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, the All-Powerful, the Lord, the Maker and Creator, Ruler, Appointer and Orderer, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be. These beings were created by me. How so? Because I first had this thought: "Oh, if only some other beings would come here!" That was my wish, and then these beings came into this existence!’ But those beings who arose subsequently think: ‘This, friends, is Brahma, Great Brahma, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, the All-Powerful, the Lord, the Maker and Creator, Ruler, Appointer and Orderer, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be. How so? We have seen that he was here first, and that we arose after him.

“And this being that arose first is longer-lived, more beautiful and more powerful than they are. And it may happen that some being falls from that realm and arises

in this world. Having arisen in this world, he goes forth from the household life into homelessness. Having gone forth, he by means of effort, exertion, application, earnestness and right attention attains to such a degree of mental concentration that he thereby recalls his last existence, but recalls none before that. And he thinks: 'That Brahmā... he made us, and he is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, the same for ever and ever. But we who were created by that Brahma, we are impermanent, unstable, short-lived, fated to fall away, and we have come to this world.' This is the first case whereby some ascetics and Brahmins are partly Eternalists and partly Non-Eternalists." - [DN 1.2.5]

This is a fascinating way to understand how a human being might believe with all his or her heart that there is a creator God. As in the case of eternalists, it comes from a partial recollection of a previous life or lives and a subsequent misunderstanding of that recollection.

This may sound like ancient Indian lore, but in certain meditative states like jhāna - states that are not unique to Buddhist mysticism - these experiences can and do occur. Even Buddhists have attained a sense of oneness, and they believe that this is nirvāṇa, final release. It is not, as the Buddha discovered, but if you do not have a proper understanding of what is happening, you can misinterpret the experience. This is very common in advanced meditators. This is one reason that right view is so important in Buddhist practice.

The reason, by the way, that this class of views is called "partly eternalistic and partly non-eternalistic" is that having descended from a previous life in a heavenly realm, that person believes that the beings in heaven are eternal, while those who fall from heaven are not. In the next two forms of wrong view, beings fall from lower heavens where there are many gods (devas). This leads to a poly-theistic belief, where the beings in the heavenly realm are permanent and those in the human realm are

not.

The fourth instance of wrong view in this class is also interesting. Here the person reasons that while the body is impermanent and dies, the consciousness is permanent and unchanging:

> *"In this case there is an ascetic or brahmin who does not in truth know whether a thing is good or bad. He thinks: 'I do not in truth know whether this is good or whether it is bad. Not knowing which is right, I might declare: "That is good," or "That is bad," and that might be a lie, and that would distress me. And if I were distressed, that would be a hindrance to me.' Thus fearing to lie, abhorring to lie, he does not declare a thing to be good or bad, but when asked about this or that matter, he resorts to evasive statements and wriggles like an eel: 'I don't say this, I don't say that. I don't say it is otherwise. I don't say it is not. I don't not say it is not.' This is the first case."* - [DN 1.2.13]

This is a case that I think a lot of Westerners can relate to. Of course the body dies, but some unchanging entity lives on forever. The unchanging part is key for the Buddha's teaching. We are not the same person even from moment to moment, must less over long periods of time. You are not the same person now that you were when you were five years old. The ability to change is what makes Buddhist practice possible. We can train our minds to be wiser and more skillful. If, as this form of wrong view suggests, the consciousness is permanent and unchanging, it is not possible to do this.

One of the interesting points about these first eight forms of wrong view is that the Buddha, in a sense, gives them credence. Instead of summarily rejecting theism or poly-theism as being ignorant and delusional – which is what many atheists do - the Buddha shows how such beliefs can come from direct, personal experience. Even highly advanced meditators can

come to believe in these wrong views. The lesson here is, I think, more about how difficult it is to truly know and experience ultimate reality, what is really true. This is one reason that I think the Buddha's explanations here are important. They show a more compassionate way of looking at sincere people who may have simply come to the wrong conclusion. But the Buddha is implying that they do not arrive at their beliefs out of stupidity, meanness, or "feeble-mindedness." It is quite the opposite.

Finitists and Infinitists

The next four types of wrong view are part of what in Buddhism are called "the ten indeterminate questions." They are speculations that in the Buddha's view detract from our practice. They are sidetracks. Further, the implication is that a fully awakened person can understand the answer to these questions, but it is not possible to know the answers until a full awakening.

The next four types of wrong view are:

1. "This world is finite and bounded by a circle."
2. "This world is infinite and unbounded."
3. "…the world as finite up-and-down, and infinite across."
4. "This world is neither finite nor infinite. "

As in the previous classes of wrong view, the first three of these views come from meditative experience. The fourth comes from "hammering it out by reason."

Eel-wrigglers

I worked with a guy for 18 years, and during all that time I only once knew him to concede that something was true. Whenever you made a statement about something, he would immediately respond with some skeptical comment. He was very academic and had been trained in

science. And pretty much the only thing he knew how to do was to poke holes in what someone else was saying. We would call such a person a skeptic. The colorful term for this in Buddhism is “eel-wriggler.”

As I am fond of saying, something is true. You may find it to be proof of superior intellect to always be skeptical, but that does not really get you anywhere in the end. One question to ask yourself is, do you really want to know what is true? If you do, that is going to take serious effort. And being perpetually skeptical is a form of mental laziness.

Of course, the Buddhist path is not about unquestioning faith. It is quite the opposite. It is about a determined effort to conduct an experiment with your own mind as the object of the experiment. But the lazy person’s way out is to assert a superior intellectual position, but never to do the demanding work of actually discovering the truth. Doing the work requires a great deal of humility and a great deal of diligence.

I love the term “eel-wriggling,” and I also love the Buddha’s descriptions of eel-wrigglers. Here is the first case of an eel-wriggler:

> *“In this case there is an ascetic or brahmin who does not in truth know whether a thing is good or bad. He thinks: ‘I do not in truth know whether this is good or whether it is bad. Not knowing which is right, I might declare: "That is good," or "That is bad," and that might be a lie, and that would distress me. And if I were distressed, that would be a hindrance to me.’ Thus fearing to lie, abhorring to lie, he does not declare a thing to be good or bad, but when asked about this or that matter, he resorts to evasive statements and wriggles like an eel: ‘I don’t say this, I don’t say that. I don’t say it is otherwise. I don’t say it is not. I don’t not say it is not.’ This is the first case.”* - [DN 1.2.24]

Once again see how the Buddha gives some credence to their position,

even if it is wrong view. He understands and appreciates the sincere desire to at least be truthful while still acknowledging how harmful such a view can be.

The Buddha went on to describe two more types of eel-wriggling:

> *"What is the second way? Here an ascetic or brahmin does not in truth know whether a thing is good or bad. He thinks: 'I might declare: "That is good," or "That is bad," and I might feel desire or lust or hatred or aversion. If I felt desire, lust, hatred or aversion, that would be attachment on my part. If I felt attachment, that would distress me, and if I were distressed, that would be a hindrance to me.' Thus, fearing attachment, abhorring attachment, he resorts to evasive statements... This is the second case.*
>
> *"What is the third way? Here an ascetic or brahmin does not in truth know whether a thing is good or bad. He thinks: 'I might declare: "That is good," or "That is bad," but there are ascetics and brahmins who are wise, skilful, practised debaters, like archers who can split hairs, who go around destroying others' views with their wisdom, and they might cross-examine me, demanding my reasons and arguing. And I might not be able to reply. Not being able to reply would distress me, and if I were distressed, that would be a hindrance to me.' Thus, fearing debate, abhorring debate, he resorts to evasive statements. This is the third case."* - [DN 1.2.25-26]

The final case of an eel-wriggler is not nearly as kind:

> *"Here, an ascetic or brahmin is dull and stupid. Because of his dullness and stupidity, when he is questioned he*

resorts to evasive statements and wriggles like an eel…”
- [DN 1.2.27]

Yikes.

Many people think of Buddhism as being very passive. It can be, but there are times like this when the Buddha did not pull his punches. As we have seen, the Buddha was particularly harsh when his monks misrepresented the Dharma. Here he seems to be questioning the motives, or perhaps the capacity, of the eel-wriggler. And he is not afraid to attack such a position.

The Buddha here is trying to point out how stubborn skepticism gets in the way of becoming wiser and more skillful. You can always poke holes in someone’s thinking. But as the Buddha often pointed out, look at the motivation – the intention – behind someone’s actions. As you can see in the passages referenced so far, the Buddha is very kind, patient, considerate, and compassionate if someone is sincere, even if they are wrong. But if someone is not sincere, if – in modern terms – they are only seeking to advance their own ego, or if they are mentally lazy, he did not mince his words.

The stakes here, from a Buddhist perspective, are very high. What is at stake is our very lives, and the foundation for how we proceed is based on the first fold in the Noble Eightfold Path, right view. If your thinking is flawed, especially if the reason your thinking is flawed is because of laziness or insincerity, that is not a time to be dancing around the main issue.

The next two types of wrong view are the last ones that relate to the past. The Buddha calls these Chance-Originationist views. That mouthful basically means that the self and the world have arisen by chance. They are random events. This means that they are not caused, and in the Buddha’s system of understanding, nothing arises without a cause. Even nirvāṇa, which is not itself caused, arises because the disciple undertakes a training and develops the path. So while nirvāṇa itself is not caused, in

order to attain nirvāṇa, one must use a process of causes and effects.

There are some people who claim that using causality to attain something that is not caused is not possible. In fact, they teach that there is no attainment; there is no goal. This is the teaching of non-duality.

However, as Bhikkhu Bodhi has so eloquently argued, the Buddha did not teach non-duality. I know that saying this will ruffle a few feathers, but this is important. I first learned a Dharma that included non-duality, and I found it very confusing. It was a great hindrance to my practice.

Then I started reading the Buddha's discourses, and I discovered a much more coherent Dharma, one in which there is saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. Saṃsāra is conditioned and nirvāṇa is unconditioned. This is the duality.

There is a discussion along these lines in the Saṃyutta Nikāya. A brahmin asked Ānanda how is it possible to use desire to attain a goal that does not have desire:

> *I have heard that on one occasion Ven. Ānanda was staying in Kosambi, at Ghosita's Park. Then the brahmin Unnabha went to where Ven. Ānanda was staying and on arrival greeted him courteously. After an exchange of friendly greetings and courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to Ven. Ānanda: "Master Ānanda, what is the aim of this holy life lived under Gotama the contemplative?"*
>
> *"brahmin, the holy life is lived under the Blessed One with the aim of abandoning desire."*
>
> *"Is there a path, is there a practice, for the abandoning of that desire?"*
>
> *"Yes, there is a path, there is a practice, for the abandoning of that desire."*

“What is the path, the practice, for the abandoning of that desire?”

“brahmin, there is the case where a monk develops the base of power endowed with concentration founded on desire and the fabrications of exertion. He develops the base of power endowed with concentration founded on persistence... concentration founded on intent... concentration founded on discrimination and the fabrications of exertion. This, brahmin, is the path, this is the practice for the abandoning of that desire.”

“If that’s so, Master Ānanda, then it’s an endless path, and not one with an end, for it’s impossible that one could abandon desire by means of desire.”

“In that case, brahmin, let me question you on this matter. Answer as you see fit. What do you think: Didn’t you first have desire, thinking, ‘I’ll go to the park,’ and then when you reached the park, wasn't that particular desire allayed?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Didn't you first have persistence, thinking,’I’ll go to the park,’ and then when you reached the park, wasn’t that particular persistence allayed?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Didn’t you first have the intent, thinking, ‘I’ll go to the park’ and then when you reached the park, wasn’t that particular intent allayed?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Didn’t you first have [an act of] discrimination, thinking, ‘I’ll go to the park,’ and then when you reached the park, wasn’t that particular act of discrimination allayed?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So it is with an arahant whose mental effluents are ended, who has reached fulfillment, done the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, totally destroyed the fetter of becoming, and who is released through right gnosis. Whatever desire he first had for the attainment of arahantship, on attaining arahantship that particular desire is allayed. Whatever persistence he first had for the attainment of arahantship, on attaining arahantship that particular persistence is allayed. Whatever intent he first had for the attainment of arahantship, on attaining arahantship that particular intent is allayed. Whatever discrimination he first had for the attainment of arahantship, on attaining arahantship that particular discrimination is allayed. So what do you think, brahmin? Is this an endless path, or one with an end?”

“You’re right, Master Ānanda. This is a path with an end, and not an endless one. Magnificent, Master Ānanda! Magnificent! Just as if he were to place upright what was overturned, to reveal what was hidden, to show the way to one who was lost, or to carry a lamp into the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way has Master Ānanda — through many lines of reasoning — made the Dhamma clear. I go to Master Gotama for refuge, to the Dhamma, and to the Saṇgha of monks. May Master Ānanda remember me as a lay follower who

has gone for refuge, from this day forward, for life.” - [SN 51.15]

Notice a couple of things here. First, there is a goal. Second, there is effort. As the Buddha said, there are activities associated with the Noble Eightfold Path. Dukkha is to be understood. Craving is to be abandoned. Cessation is to be realized. The path is to be developed.

You use a causal process to abandon causation. It is like climbing up a ladder. Each run represents a subtler form of causation. As you climb the ladder, each rung is abandoned. Finally you get to the final rung, which is ignorance. You climb over that rung, abandon it, and you are free. You are on the roof. You do not need the ladder any more.

Conscious Post-Mortem Survival

The next 44 types of wrong view are based in beliefs about the future. The first is what Maurice Walsh translates as “conscious post-mortem survival.”

If some of these terms make your head swim, welcome to the club. You can probably see why certain types of minds, ones that are very academic or intellectual or very philosophical, are draw to Buddhism. And if some of what you read goes right over your head, do not worry about it. Understand it the best you can, but do not turn it into a problem.

Even some of the most sophisticated minds in Buddhism will admit at times that they do not understand something. A passage in the texts may come from a cultural context that has been lost. It may not have been preserved properly. Or maybe the point the Buddha is making is just very subtle. The purpose of the Buddha’s teachings is always practical. They exist to help us evolve, to become more skillful, happy, and useful. If a teaching is not of value to you, then press on. Perhaps some day it will be helpful, and perhaps it will not. Either way is fine.

This next category of wrong views has 16 flavors:

"They declare that the self after death is healthy and conscious and (1) material, (2) immaterial, (3) both material and immaterial, (4) neither material nor immaterial, (5) finite, (6) infinite, (7) both, (8) neither, (9) of uniform perception, (10) of varied perception, (11) of limited perception, (12) of unlimited perception, (13) wholly happy, (14) wholly miserable, (15) both, (16) neither.

"These are the sixteen ways in which these ascetics and brahmins proclaim a doctrine of conscious post-mortem survival." - [DN 1.2.38-39]

Walshe points out that the first two of these were beliefs of the Ājīvikas and the Jains, two of the prominent samaṇa groups of the Buddha's time.

So here we have views that have three parts. The first two parts are 1) that the self is healthy and 2) that it is conscious. The third part is one of the 16 variable components.

These views concern what happens to the self after death. As we have seen, the "self" in Buddhism is a tricky thing. The Buddha treated the self in two ways. The first way is that the "self" is a process. As already discussed, everything in the Buddha's teaching is not, in fact, a thing, but a process, the one exception being nirvāṇa.

But more importantly, the "self" is more of a strategy. When we self identify with the five aggregates, or, more simply, the mind and body, we cause stress and suffering for us. When we let go of that form of self-identification, we free ourselves from one of the most fundamental forms of dukkha. In fact, one of the factors that is necessary to become a stream-enterer (the first stage of awakening) is to let go of the fetter of self-view, of self-identification with the mind and body.

Again, it is not so much a question of whether the self exists or does not exist or neither exists or does not exit or both exists and does not exist. It

is a question of what view helps in leading to awakening. It is a subtle point. And once you have awakened, the question of whether the self exists is irrelevant.

You can actually experience this in the states of meditative absorption, jhāna. You will enter a state that is free from suffering. No self can be experienced. There is simply happiness, bliss, and freedom. If you ask yourself in this state whether there is a self, you won't care.

I have done a bit of an end run around these 16 wrong views here by not addressing them individually. The reason for that is that they all fall under the same category in Buddhism, and that is that they offer speculations based on a fundamentally flawed principle, and that is the nature of the self. These types of speculations get in the way of progress on the path. That is the important point.

Unconscious Post-Mortem Survival

The next eight wrong views flip the script to make the self unconscious after death:

> *"They declare that the self after death is healthy and neither conscious nor unconscious and (1) material, (2) immaterial, (3) both, (4) neither, (5) finite, (6) infinite, (7) both, (8) neither.*
>
> *"These are the eight ways in which these ascetics and brahmins proclaim a doctrine of Neither-Conscious-Nor-UnConscious Post-Mortem Survival."* - [DN 1.3.7]

Once again, these types of wrong view are based on ideas about the nature of the self. They are rooted in meditative experience, but an incorrect understanding of that experience.

And finally we complete the circle by taking the self to be:

Neither-Conscious-Nor-Unconscious Post-Mortem Survival

> *"They declare that the self after death is healthy and neither conscious nor unconscious and (1) material, (2) immaterial, (3) both, (4) neither, (5) finite, (6) infinite, (7) both, (8) neither.*
>
> *"These are the eight ways in which these ascetics and brahmins proclaim a doctrine of Neither-Conscious-Nor-UnConscious Post-Mortem Survival."* - [DN 1.3.7]

Annihilationism (nihilism)

I have been to retreats with at least one Dharma teacher and one person with a Ph.D. in Buddhism who teach that when you die, you die, and that is it. You come to an end. There is no continuation. This is fundamentally the view of what is called "secular Buddhism."

This is called "annihilationism" in the Buddha's teaching, and he summarily rejected it. In fact, rebirth and continuation are a central teaching of the Buddha. It is part of the teaching on karma. It is very difficult to read the Canon and not believe that the Buddha taught rebirth. If you do not teach rebirth, then you are teaching a little bit of Buddhadharma mixed with a bunch-of-stuff-somebody-made-up.

To be sure, if all this is new to you, it does not have to be a hindrance to practice. I practiced for many years without thinking about rebirth. I was just trying to stay with the breath. I read as much as I could about meditation, I listened to a lot of Dharma talks, and I went to retreats when I could. That kept me busy for a long time. So if rebirth is a difficult topic for you, don't worry about it. Put it on a back corner of your mind. You will come to it when it is appropriate.

As a side note let me make a comment about Christianity and reincarnation. I will apologize ahead of time for being a little out of my area, so if I don't get this quite right, please be patient with me. But I think I have the gist of it right.

You may know that in early Christianity there were different schools, just as there are in Buddhism. And when Constantine made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire, he actually chose a specific type of Christianity. The great losers were the Gnostic Christians. And Gnostic Christians believed in reincarnation:

> *In December, 1945, early Christian writings containing many secrets of the early Christian religion were found in upper Egypt, a location where many Christians fled during the Roman invasion of Jerusalem. Undisturbed since their concealment almost two thousand years ago, these manuscripts of Christian mysticism rank in importance with the Dead Sea Scrolls. These writings affirmed the existence of the doctrine of reincarnation being taught among the early Jews and Christians. These Christian mystics, referred to as Christian Gnostics, were ultimately destroyed by the orthodox Church for being heretics.*
>
> - [Kevin Williams, "Reincarnation in Early Christianity"]

(For an excellent introduction to Gnostic Christianity go to the web site for The Gnostic Society Library.)

There are many similarities between Gnostic Christianity and Buddhism. Even the word "gnostic" means to know, and Buddhism is all about direct, clear seeing. And as implied in the quote, Gnostic Christianity had its origins in Jewish mysticism. And much later we have the mystical school of Islam, the Sufis. Some people even assert that in Jesus' lost 40 days in the desert, he went to India, where he was influence by

Buddhism. So the links between Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam may be closer than at first appear.

I am not going to go into detail on this class of wrong views other than to note, as I already have, that the next seven kinds of wrong view say that when a human being dies, that is all there is. We even use the term "dead end." There is nothing more.

Here is the first wrong view of annihilationism. This one maps most closely to the position held by "secular Buddhists":

> *"There are, monks, some ascetics and brahmins who are Annihilationists, who proclaim the annihilation, destruction and non-existence of beings, and they do so in seven ways. On what basis?*
>
> *"Here a certain ascetic or brahmin declares and holds the view: Since this self is material, composed of the four great elements, the product of mother and father, at the breaking-up of the body it is annihilated and perishes, and does not exist after death. This is the way in which this self is annihilated."* - [DN 1.3.9-10]

The other forms of wrong annihilationist views are variations on this theme.

Someone may not believe in rebirth, and that is not a problem. But saying that the Buddha did not teach rebirth is undeniably a misrepresentation of the Buddha's Dharma.

Wrong Views about Nirvāṇa

The final five types of wrong view have to do with incorrect definitions of nirvāṇa. They define states that the holders of these views claim are final release, but they are not:

1. Nirvāṇa is attained through indulging the five senses.
2. Nirvāṇa is attained by entering the first jhāna (state of meditative absorption).
3. Nirvāṇa is attained by entering the second jhāna.
4. Nirvāṇa is attained by entering the third jhāna.
5. Nirvāṇa is attained by entering the fourth jhāna.

Jhāna is part of the path to final awakening, but it is just a step. Jhāna gets the mind calmer and quieter so the meditator can see increasingly subtle forms of mental fabrications, or saṇkhāras. But jhāna is not nirvāṇa. Jhāna is a conditioned state, and nirvāṇa is unconditioned.

Some Observations About this Sutta

This may all seem a little dizzying, and to some extent it is. The Buddha was probably going into great detail to refute the many doctrines of his day. But some items are worth emphasizing:

1. The patient and kind way that he addresses people who hold wrong views but who do so from a basically good intention. He is trying to correct their wrong views, while showing compassion for their efforts.
2. The aggressive way in which he attacked wrong views if the intention was poor or the effort was lazy.
3. How this sutta shows how important it is to keep pushing even when one attains certain meditative states. It is easy to get stuck along the way, especially if powerful, psychic events occur.

As for the views themselves, the three general areas that he covered are:

1. Eternalism – the notion that a self endures forevermore.
2. Annihillationism – the idea that the self ends at death.
3. The self – how misunderstandings about the self interfere with practice.

As noted, if you get sidetracked trying to define the self, what the self

was in the past, or what the self will be in the future, you get lost in a "thicket of views":

> *"When he attends unwisely in this way, one of six views arises in him. The view 'self exists for me' arises in him as true and established; or the view 'no self exists for me' arises in him as true and established; or the view 'I perceive self with self' arises in him as true and established; or the view 'I perceive not-self with self' arises in him as true and established; or the view 'I perceive self with not-self' arises in him as true and established; or else he has some such view as this: 'It is this self of mine that speaks and feels and experiences here and there the result of good and bad actions; but this self of mine is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and it will endure as long as eternity.' This speculative view, bhikkhus, is called the thicket of views, the wilderness of views, the contortion of views, the vacillation of views, the fetter of views. Fettered by the fetter of views, the untaught ordinary person is not freed from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair; he is not freed from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair; he is not freed from suffering, I say."* - [MN 2.8]

The objective in the Buddha's training is, as he defines it right here, to be "free from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair." The Buddhadharma is not a topic for debate. It is not a description of ultimate reality. It is a path, one that if followed to completion will lead to final freedom from stress and suffering.

8. Right View

The last sutta we will look at is the "Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta: Right View" [MN 9].

This sutta is not one that was given by the Buddha. It was given by Sāriputta. He was one of the Buddha's two chief disciples, the other one being Moggallāna.

Sāriputta is one of the truly extraordinary people in all of human history. He had a brilliant, genius level intellect. He was a great meditator. There is a story about Sāriputta being so absorbed in concentration that he was hit on the head by a yakka (a "mischievous spirit"), but because his concentration was so deep, he suffered no harm:

> *And on that occasion two yakkhas who were companions were flying from north to south on some business or other. They saw Ven. Sāriputta – his head newly shaven – sitting in the open air. Seeing him, the first yakkha said to the second, "I'm inspired to give this contemplative a blow on the head."*
>
> *When this was said, the second yakkha said to the first, "Enough of that, my good friend. Don't lay a hand on the contemplative. He's an outstanding contemplative, of great power and great might."*
>
> *A second time, the first yakkha said to the second, "I'm inspired to give this contemplative a blow on the head."*
>
> *A second time, the second yakkha said to the first, "Enough of that, my good friend. Don't lay a hand on the contemplative. He's an outstanding contemplative, of*

great power and great might."

A third time, the first yakkha said to the second, "I'm inspired to give this contemplative a blow on the head."

A third time, the second yakkha said to the first, "Enough of that, my good friend. Don't lay a hand on the contemplative. He's an outstanding contemplative, of great power and great might."

Then the first yakkha, ignoring the second yakkha, gave Ven. Sāriputta a blow on the head. And with that blow he might have knocked over an elephant seven or eight cubits tall, or split a great rocky crag. But right there the yakkha – yelling, "I'm burning!" – fell into the Great Hell.

(There is a cautionary note here. If you are ever tempted to hit an arahant over the head, you might want to think twice about it.)

But Sāriputta was unfazed:

Now, Ven. Moggallāna – with his divine eye, pure and surpassing the human–saw the yakkha give Ven. Sāriputta a blow on the head. Seeing this, he went to Ven. Sāriputta and, on arrival, said to him, "I hope you are well, friend Sāriputta. I hope you are comfortable. I hope you are feeling no pain."

"I am well, friend Moggallāna. I am comfortable. But I do have a slight headache."

"How amazing, friend Sāriputta! How astounding! How great your power and might! Just now a yakkha gave you a blow on the head. So great was that blow that he might have knocked over an elephant seven or eight cubits tall,

or split a great rocky crag. But all you say is this: 'I am well, friend Moggallāna. I am comfortable. But I do have a slight headache'!"

"How amazing, friend Moggallāna! How astounding! How great your power and might! Where you saw a yakkha just now, I didn't even see a dust devil!" - [Ud 4.4]

There is something quite endearing about the respect that Sāriputta and Moggāllana show each other here.

Sāriputta is credited with being the "father of the Abhidhamma," the complex and detailed treatise on the propagation of mind states. It is the quantum physics of Buddhism.

But Sāriputta wasn't just some disconnected, brilliant intellect. He had a huge heart. He and Ānanda were great friends, and Sāriputta and Ānanda often solved disputes in the Saṇgha. The two of them were instrumental in ending the problems at the Kosambi monastery. And when Sāriputta died, Ānanda, who was not yet an arahant, was distraught. Even the Buddha said when Sāriputta died, "It is just as if the largest branch would break off a great tree standing possessed of heartwood…"

When you read discourses by Sāriputta, it is useful to keep all of this in mind. He could go into great detail on any subject, and he often did. And so it is with the Sāmadiṭṭhi Sutta.

The backstory is this. Sāriputta was at Jetavana, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park. He addressed a group of bhikkhus:

"'One of right view, one of right view,' is said, friends. In what way is a noble disciple one of right view, whose view is straight, who has unwavering confidence in the Dhamma, and has arrived at this true Dhamma?" - [MN 9.2]

There are a couple of interesting things in this brief passage. First, Sāriputta initiates the conversation. This is a little unusual in the Canon. The Buddha and his senior monks were probably being pestered a lot to teach and give guidance. In fact, one of Ānanda's jobs as the Buddha's attendant was to keep these sorts of requests at bay. But here Sāriputta was the one to begin the dialog.

The second item of interest is something to which I alluded in the previous chapter. Sāriputta used the term "unwavering confidence in the Dhamma." This is one of the conditions for stream-entry, for awakening. But this is not just an intellectual confidence. It is seeing for yourself that what the Buddha taught is true. Here Sāriputta was speaking about this type of understanding, one that is "unwavering," one that the disciple sees for him or herself.

It is also worth noting here, once again, that in the Canon, when the term "bhikkhus" is used, it can mean any combination of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen, although seeing that this talk was given at a monastery, the chances are that this was just monks.

The monks replied:

> *"Indeed, friend, we would come from far away to learn from the venerable Sāriputta the meaning of this statement. It would be good if the venerable Sāriputta would explain the meaning of this statement. Having heard it from him, the bhikkhus will remember it."* - [DN 9.2]

"We would come from far away…" The monks know that they were very privileged to hear a discourse by Sāriputta. And indeed, throughout Buddhist history, people have traveled great distances to hear the teachings. This was true during the Buddha's time as well as later. Master Dogen left Japan and went to China to hear the teachings. He spent many years there. In modern times many of our teachers went to Asia. I did a one-year program in Massachusetts, and one of the

participants was from Texas. She traveled to Massachusetts four times that year. I went to a monastery in a remote part of West Virginia, and one of the participants had come from Seattle. Once you get bitten by he Dharma bug, distance is hardly a consideration.

The Wholesome and the Unwholesome

Sāriputta then began to expound on different ways of expressing right view. He began with the wholesome and the unwholesome in a passage that is reminiscent of the Buddha's advice to his son Rāhula in the "Ambalatthika-rahulovada Sutta: Instructions to Rāhula at Mango Stone" [MN 61]:

> *"When, friends, a noble disciple understands the unwholesome and the root of the unwholesome, the wholesome and the root of the wholesome, in that way he is one of right view, whose view is straight, who has unwavering confidence in the Dhamma and has arrived at this true Dhamma.*
>
> *"And what, friends, is the unwholesome, what is the root of the unwholesome, what is the wholesome, what is the root of the wholesome? Killing living beings is unwholesome; taking what is not given is unwholesome; misconduct in sensual pleasures is unwholesome; false speech is unwholesome; malicious speech is unwholesome; harsh speech is unwholesome; gossip is unwholesome; covetousness is unwholesome; ill will is unwholesome; wrong view is unwholesome. This is called the unwholesome.*
>
> *"And what is the root of the unwholesome? Greed is a root of the unwholesome; hate is a root of the unwholesome; delusion is a root of the unwholesome.*

This is called the root of the unwholesome." - [MN 9.3-5]

Here Sāriputta enumerated the precepts, but then he went on to describe the "root of the unwholesome." These are the Three Poisons, or the Three Fires: greed, hatred, and delusion. They are the enablers of poor ethical conduct.

The bhikkhus "delighted and rejoiced in the venerable Sāriputta's words." And then they asked him:

"But, friend, might there be another way in which a noble disciple is one of right view... and has arrived at this true Dhamma?" - [MN 9.9]

To which Sāriputta responded, "There might be, friends."

Nutriment

His next expression of right view is something that I have not written about before, and that is "nutriment." This is a common theme in the Buddha's teachings. "Nutriments" are how we feed. It is how we sustain the body and mind and continue the rounds of rebirth.

The Second Noble Truth is, of course, the Noble Truth of the Cause of Dukkha, which is craving. The Pāli word for craving is "taṇhā." "Taṇhā" also means "thirst." It has the implication of feeding, constantly feeding. We constantly thirst; we constantly feed. Start with the bodies. Our bodies cannot exist without feeding. And this simple fact causes a lot of suffering:

"We have a body that needs to be fed; we have to eat. When we eat, there's suffering, even if we're very strict vegetarians. The farmers who have to clear the fields and plant the food, the animals who die when the fields are cleared, the people who have to transport the food once

it's grown: A lot of work and misery goes into that. So when the Buddha introduced the topic of causality to children, he started with a harsh fact of life. This is your prime experience of causality: Feeding goes on all the time. Without it, life couldn't last."

- [Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "Adult Dharma"]

And indeed, the first type of nutriment in the Buddha's teaching is actual food:

"And what is nutriment, what is the origin of nutriment, what is the cessation of nutriment, what is the way leading to the cessation of nutriment? There are four kinds of nutriment for the maintenance of beings that already have come to be and for the support of those about to come to be. What four? They are: physical food as nutriment, gross or subtle; contact as the second; mental volition as the third; and consciousness as the fourth." - [MN 9.11]

In this passage you can see all four types of nutriments: food, sense contact, "mental volition" (intention/will), and consciousness.

Feeding on sense contact is, I think, self explanatory. Our minds are constantly seeking out sensory experiences. We want to see beautiful sights. We want to hear beautiful sounds. We want to touch pleasant objects. We want to taste pleasant tastes. We want to think happy thoughts. Our minds are constantly seeking out those experiences. Someone who has meditated even five minutes can usually see this. Our minds simply cannot settle down, be still, and do nothing. It's like trying to deal with a two-year-old.

The role of intention in the Buddha's teachings is key. We only ever act because we intend to. And actions are not limited to bodily actions. On a

gross level, actions are of three types: body, speech, and mind.

But the teaching on dependent co-arising takes us deeply into the world of mental activity. Every mental activity is preceeded by an intention. And this is one of the most significant problems that we have in causing dukkha. In fact, one of the definitions of nirvāṇa is when you are able to see the intention that comes before any activity, even a mental one, and let go of the intention. This ends the process of fabrication and leads to final release.

Here is an opportunity to say something further about dependent co-arising. I mentioned in that section that I spent a lot of time and effort trying to penetrate this teaching. I think that one reason why it was so difficult is not only because of the depth and subtlety of this subject, but also because most explanations of dependent co-arising end with the 12 steps.

If you just look at the 12 steps in dependent co-arising, it looks like a linear progression. But if you look deeper you see how each of the steps has inner definitions. Craving, for example, is of three types: craving for sense pleasures, craving for material existence, and craving for non-existence. And when you add in these sub-steps, the non-linear nature of dependent co-arising becomes clear.

The "Ahara Sutta: Nutriment" [SN 12.11] does something particularly interesting, and that is that it replaces clinging in the steps of dependent-co-arising with nutriment:

> *"Bhikkhus, these four kinds of nutriment have what as their source, what as their origin, from what are they born and produced? These four kinds of nutriment have craving as their source, craving as their origin; they are born and produced from craving.*
>
> *"And this craving has what as its source, what as its origin, from what is it born and produced? This craving*

has feeling as its source, feeling as its origin; it is born and produced from feeling." - [SN 12.11]

I think this is one reason that Ṭhānissaro Bhikkku's exposition of dependent co-arising makes more sense. He has gone to other sources for the complete description of the causal pattern. He fills in the blanks, and now we can see the full complexity of the causal relationships.

Finally, there is consciousness. When there is craving for food, craving for sense contact, and intention to act, consciousness arises:

"Just as — when there is dye, lac, yellow orpiment, indigo, or crimson — a dyer or painter would paint the picture of a woman or a man, complete in all its parts, on a well-polished panel or wall, or on a piece of cloth; in the same way, where there is passion, delight, and craving for the nutriment of physical food... contact... intellectual intention... consciousness, consciousness lands there and increases. Where consciousness lands and increases, there is the alighting of name-and-form. Where there is the alighting of name-and-form, there is the growth of fabrications. Where there is the growth of fabrications, there is the production of renewed becoming in the future. Where there is the production of renewed becoming in the future, there is future birth, aging, and death, together, I tell you, with sorrow, affliction, and despair.

"Where there is no passion for the nutriment of physical food, where there is no delight, no craving, then consciousness does not land there or increase. Where consciousness does not land or increase, there is no alighting of name-and-form. Where there is no alighting of name-and-form, there is no growth of fabrications.

> *Where there is no growth of fabrications, there is no production of renewed becoming in the future. Where there is no production of renewed becoming in the future, there is no future birth, aging, and death. That, I tell you, has no sorrow, affliction, or despair.”* - [SN 12.64]

This is an interesting simile. The Buddha compared the nutriments to a painter’s paints. The existence of paint does not necessarily mean that you have to paint. The problem is not so much the existence of the nutriments, it is what we do with them. We cannot resist taking the paints and creating - fabricating - something from them them.

This notion of feeding can be very helpful in your practice. You can see how the mind is always looking, looking, looking for a landing spot. Just as the Buddha said, consciousness “lands and increases.” The word “lands” is, I think, a good one. That is exactly how it feels. The consciousness lands on some activity, some input, and then it begins to grow and swell and feed on itself. This is nutriment, and this is how we perpetuate all kinds of mischief.

The Four Noble Truths

The bhikkhus are having a really good time by now, and they want more:

> *“Saying, ‘Good, friend,’ the bhikkhus delighted and rejoiced in the venerable Sāriputta’s words. Then they asked him a further question: ‘But, friend, might there be another way in which a noble disciple is one of right view… and has arrived at this true Dhamma?’”* - [MN 9.13]

And of course this is Sāriputta. There is another way:

> *“There might be, friends.*

"When, friends, a noble disciple understands suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the way leading to the cessation of suffering, in that way he is one of right view… and has arrived at this true Dhamma.

"And what is suffering, what is the origin of suffering, what is the cessation of suffering, what is the way leading to the cessation of suffering? Birth is suffering; aging is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering; not to obtain what one wants is suffering; in short, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering. This is called suffering.

"And what is the origin of suffering? It is craving, which brings renewal of being, is accompanied by delight and lust, and delights in this and that; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for being, and craving for non-being. This is called the origin of suffering.

"And what is the cessation of suffering? It is the remainderless fading away and ceasing, the giving up, relinquishing, letting go, and rejecting of that same craving. This is called the cessation of suffering.

"And what is the way leading to the cessation of suffering? It is just this Noble Eightfold Path; that is, right view… right concentration. This is called the way leading to the cessation of suffering." - [MN 9.13-18]

This is, I think, a particularly articulate way of expressing The Four Noble Truths. Look at it closely. To begin with, note something that I mentioned previously when discussing dukkha. The Buddha – or in this

case, Sāriputta - never said that life is suffering. But they gave an inventory, examples of dukkha, ending with clinging to the aggregates (mind and body). And again, it is not the aggregates that are the problem. The problem is the clinging. We do not want to kill our bodies and minds. (Yikes!) Destroying the aggregates won't solve the problem of dukkha. We just want to stop self-identifying with them as "me."

Sāriputta went on to The Second Noble Truth, and here again he specifically told us what constitutes craving: craving for sensual pleasures, craving for being, and craving for non-being.

(Some people think that "desire" is the problem, but again, the Buddha never said that. In order to develop the path, we need desire. We have to want to do it. The Four Right Energies – which are the sixth fold in the Noble Eightfold Path, are all expressed in terms of desire. The Buddha was quite specific about what types of craving cause problems.)

And for The Third Noble Truth, he was also precise in what cessation means: "It is the remainderless fading away and ceasing, the giving up, relinquishing, letting go, and rejecting of that same craving."

When you read enough of Sāriputta's discourses you realized that this is an expert, someone who has really penetrated the Dharma.

(There is this show on PBS that I like to watch. It is a woodworker from North Carolina who only uses traditional hand tools. I love to watch him work. He rolls through all sorts of complicated tasks like he has done them a million times before. He has a certain flippant attitude as if to say, "Well, of course everybody can do this!" But of course, not everybody can do this. His skill is the result of years and years and years of training, and you can feel it when he describes what he is doing. Sāriputta's penetration of the Dharma is like that woodworker.)

And I suppose that it is not surprising that Sāriputta uses The Four Noble Truths as one of his expressions of right view.

Dependent Co-arising

The next twelve sections in this discourse are the twelve steps in dependent co-arising. I will not go through every one of them because we have already done that. But to give you the flavor of how Sāriputta described them, let's look at one of them. He started with the end of the chain, aging-and-death:

> *"When, friends, a noble disciple understands aging and death, the origin of aging and death, the cessation of aging and death, and the way leading to the cessation of aging and death, in that way he is one of right view… and has arrived at this true Dhamma.*
>
> *"And what is aging and death, what is the origin of aging and death, what is the cessation of aging and death, what is the way leading to the cessation of aging and death? The aging of beings in the various orders of beings, their old age, brokenness of teeth, greyness of hair, wrinkling of skin, decline of life, weakness of faculties — this is called aging. The passing of beings out of the various orders of beings, their passing away, dissolution, disappearance, dying, completion of time, dissolution of the aggregates, laying down of the body — this is called death. So this aging and this death are what is called aging and death. With the arising of birth there is the arising of aging and death. With the cessation of birth there is the cessation of aging and death. The way leading to the cessation of aging and death is just this Noble Eightfold Path; that is, right view… right concentration.*
>
> *"When a noble disciple has thus understood aging and death, the origin of aging and death, the cessation of*

> *aging and death, and the way leading to the cessation of aging and death… he here and now makes an end of suffering. In that way too a noble disciple is one of right view… and has arrived at this true Dhamma."* - [MN 9.21-23]

Here Sāriputta gave a detailed description of aging and death. He left no doubt about what he is describing. This is important because there are those who deny the truth of rebirth, and one of their claims is that when the Buddha talked about death, it was a kind of metaphor. What the Buddha meant was something akin to the end of an action or a thought or some mental event. But I think it is pretty clear here that we are talking about the end of physical life. Of that there can be no doubt.

This is an extremely long section. And here Sāriputta gave the full, expanded version of the 12 links in the chain of dependent co-arising. It is a very complete description of the causal process. I encourage you to read it. Dependent co-arising is probably the most complicated topic in the Buddha's teaching, and Sāriputta might offer a more accessible way for you to understand it.

The Taints

One of the ways in which the Buddha described his awakening is the cessation of the "taints":

> *"I have proclaimed to my disciples the way whereby by realizing for themselves with direct knowledge, they here and now enter upon and abide in the deliverance of mind and deliverance by wisdom that are taintless with the destruction of the taints. And thereby many disciples of mine abide having reached the consummation and perfection of direct knowledge."* – [MN 77.36]

The taints are 1) sense desire, 2) becoming, and 3) ignorance.

And in the final exposition of right view in this discourse, Sāriputta expressed right view in terms of the taints:

> *"And what are the taints, what is the origin of the taints, what is the cessation of the taints, what is the way leading to the cessation of the taints? There are these three taints: the taint of sensual desire, the taint of being, and the taint of ignorance. With the arising of ignorance there is the arising of the taints. With the cessation of ignorance there is the cessation of the taints. The way leading to the cessation of the taints is just this Noble Eightfold Path; that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.*
>
> *"When a noble disciple has thus understood the taints, the origin of the taints, the cessation of the taints, and the way leading to the cessation of the taints, he entirely abandons the underlying tendency to lust, he abolishes the underlying tendency to aversion, he extirpates the underlying tendency to the view and conceit 'I am,' and by abandoning ignorance and arousing true knowledge he here and now makes an end of suffering. In that way too a noble disciple is one of right view, whose view is straight, who has unwavering confidence in the Dhamma, and has arrived at this true Dhamma."* - [MN 9.70-71]

This is a remarkable discourse by a remarkable person. It is worth visiting and revisiting. And it is not surprising that the discourse ends with these words:

> *"That is what the venerable Sāriputta said. The bhikkhus were satisfied and delighted in the venerable Sāriputta's words."* - [MN 9.71]

I hope that you are satisfied and delighted in Sāriputta's words as well.

9. Miscellaneous Topics

There are a number of topics that you will run into in the Buddhist world, and it is worth taking some time to mention them. If you have read the book, I think that most of the explanations, while not very detailed, will make sense to you.

1. You are already enlightened.

You will hear this especially in the world of Zen.

The short answer is, no, you're not. This should be self-evident. When you are enlightened, you are free from suffering, at least unnecessary suffering. When you are enlightened, after you die, you are no longer subject to the realms of rebirth. When you are enlightened, you are free from the fetters. You no longer experience greed, hatred, and delusion. You no longer suffer from defilements. The Buddha never said that you are already enlightened. He said that enlightenment is an attainment, and that the path to realize that attainment is the Noble Eightfold Path.

2. You have Buddha nature, and the goal of the path is to realize your Buddha nature.

The Buddha never described such a thing as Buddha nature. Buddha nature is a thing. The Buddha went to a lot of trouble to describe saṃsāra as a realm of causes and conditions. Buddhism has always had trouble keeping itself away from defining a higher power or oneness with all things or all beings. The Buddha never described the ultimate goal as oneness with all things or a higher power.

3. Existence is non-dual, and ultimately saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are the same.

The Buddha never said this. He described saṃsāra as the realm of the conditioned and nirvāṇa as the unconditioned. Therefore, he described existence as being dual. The best description of this misconception is Bhikkhu Bodhi's article "Dhamma and Non-duality."

4. The bodhisattva path is superior to the path of the arahant. The path of the arahant is individual, while the path of the bodhisattva is altruistic.

Again, this is not something the Buddha said. At the time of the Buddha, the understanding was that throughout limitless time, every so often a Buddha is born. A Buddha is unique in that a Buddha is a discoverer of the path. Perhaps, more precisely, a Buddha rediscovers the path. This is the main way in which a Buddha differs from an arahant. A bodhisattva is a unique and extremely rare individual who aspires to become a Buddha.

In the Mahāyāna traditions, they take the bodhisattva vows. These include a vow to abstain from final liberation until all beings are liberated. This is, one would think, logistically impossible. And it ignores the practical realities of existence. The Buddha was nothing if not practical.

Very few people are interested in liberation. This is true even of meditators. I was talking to a senior member of a large, lay Buddhist group once, and I mentioned rather casually that my goal in life is to at least attain stream-entry. His response? "Good luck with that."

You cannot enlighten someone else. Even the Buddha could not do that. They have to do that for themselves. All you can do is be the best person you can be and do the most good you can do.

The Buddha taught that the goal of existence is to become free from the rounds of rebirth. That is the definition of an arahant. And it underestimates the amount of mischief we do because of our defilements. Being free from suffering and the rounds of rebirth also means that we take less, consume less, and do less damage with our unskillful conduct.

5. Arahants see into the nature of non-self, but only bodhisattvas see into the nature of emptiness.

There are lengthy – and I mean lengthy – philosophical treatises on emptiness. Emptiness is not really that complicated. Emptiness is simply the causal nature of existence. Somewhere along the line a group of heavily philosophical thinkers got really carried away describing emptiness. Remember that the Buddha devoted his teaching to describing the training that will free us from suffering. He never tried to describe the whole of reality or to create a philosophy. Following this path and bringing it to fruition is a formidable task. This is a case where you want to keep your eye on the prize. This is a case where you can really get sidetracked.

6. Concentrating on your own liberation is escapist.

In order to awaken, you must work through and get past your defilements. One reason that we spend so much time establishing a sense of well-being is because whatever bothers you, eventually you will have to work through that. You can't do an end run around

your neurosis. You have to deal with it. It is not escapist if you have to come to terms with your worst demons.

Having said that, in a sense what the Buddha taught was escapist. We are certainly trying to escape from the rounds of rebirth, and we are trying to escape from suffering. But I think that a better word is "liberate." We are trying to free ourselves.

7. Interconnectedness

In the Tibetan tradition, they use the symbol of the endless knot to represent this attribute of conditioned existence. The Buddha taught, of course, most fundamentally that we live in a universe of causes and conditions. He made the famous statement that if you try and understand all the reasons something happened, you will go mad. For those of us who are not yet free from suffering and the rounds of rebirth, it is important to understand this interconnectedness, and to be in harmony with it. We do not want to pit ourselves against a fundamental reality of existence.

Where to be careful, however, is to think of this as a good thing. Interconnectedness means that we are interconnected with some pretty unsavory people and some very uncertain conditions. Think of the politician you dislike the most. Do you think it is a good thing that you are interconnected with that person? How about white supremacists? Fascists? Sociopaths? Do you like being interconnected with earthquake faults and meteor collisions?

While we want to be in harmony with the interconnectedness of existence until we awaken, we also want to free ourselves from it.

10. Postscript

Wisdom arises from [spiritual] practice;
Without practice it decays.
Knowing this two-way path for gain and loss,
Conduct yourself so that wisdom grows.
- [Dhp 232]

These are the wisdom teachings of the Buddha. You can probably see a number of things. First, for a Western mind they are often counter-intuitive. We have to overcome some cultural conditioning. It is a different way of looking at life.

You can also see that many of these teachings are not trivial. They require constant revisiting. You read the words. This plants the seeds. But when you meditate, just meditate. Follow the breath. Watch the mind. And when the mind is ready one of those seeds will germinate. You can't make that happen. You read and study and then put it aside. Create some space for the mind and it will do the work.

And please, never forget that the foundation for the practice is virtue, the good heart. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu tells the story about teaching a meditation retreat, and one of the meditators complained that they should just go straight to the unconditioned. But Ṭhānissaro also noticed that this person's girlfriend was at the retreat, and he did not treat her well. What is the point of that? It is better to be a good-hearted person than to meditate yourself half to death trying to attain awakening. You can't anyway. So do the world and yourself a favor. Be a good person. Cultivate generosity, kindness, wisdom, compassion, and loving-kindness. Do that first and your meditation and your practice will grow like a healthy plant in fertile soil. And you will be much happier living in harmony with the world.

This is my simple religion. There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple; the philosophy is kindness.

- [Dalai Lama]

Those who
Fully cultivate the Factors of Awakening,
Give up grasping,
Enjoy non-clinging,
And have destroyed the toxins,
Are luminous,
And completely liberated in this life.
- [Dhp 89]

Appendices

Appendix A - Glossary of Terms

Abhidhamma (Pāli, Sanskrit: Abhidharma)

> The *Abhidhamma* is the third of the "three baskets" in the Pāli Canon, although scholars date it to 100 to 200 years after the time of the Buddha. It has been variously described as philosophy, psychology, and metaphysics. The *Abhidhamma* is highly revered in the Theravada tradition, and highly criticized in the others (!).

Ajahn (also *Ajaan*)

> Thai word meaning "teacher." In Buddhism it is a monk who has at least ten years of seniority.

Aṇguttara Nikāya

> Literally *Increased by One Collection*, but usually translated as *Numerical Discourses*. It is the second of the five *nikāyas*, or collections, in the Sutta Pitaka of the Pāli Canon. The *Aṇguttara Nikāya* is organized in eleven books according to the number of items referenced in them (i.e., the Four Noble Truths is in the Book of Fours).

arahant (Pāli, Sanskrit: arahat)

> Literally "one who is worthy," a perfected person, i.e., one who has attained nirvāṇa.

awakening

Also called “enlightenment.” It is a sudden insight into transcendent, ultimate truth. This is the goal of the Buddha’s system of training. After awakening one is free from un-necessary suffering, and after death is free from all suffering. In Buddhist cosmology a fully awakened person, or “arahant,” is free from the rounds of rebirth.

Bhante (Pāli)

Literally “Venerable Sir.” A senior Buddhist monastic who has been ordained at least ten years. Although it is a masculine term it is gender neutral and is used for both monks and nuns.

bhikkhu (Pāli, Sanskrit: bhikṣu)

Literally “beggar.” An ordained Buddhist monk. However the term can also refer to anyone following the Buddhist path. When the Buddha gave a talk he would address it to the highest ranking persons there. The rank order was 1) monks, 2) nuns, 3) lay men, and 4) lay women. Thus if even one monk were present, he would address the talk to “bhikkhus.”

Bodhisatta (Pāli, Sanskrit: Bodhisattva)

The term used by the Buddha to refer to himself both in his previous lives and as a young man in his current life, prior to his awakening, in the period during which he was working towards his own liberation.

deva

In the Buddhist cosmology devas are gods or heavenly beings that live in the realm just above humans.

Dharma (Sanskrit, Pāli: dhamma)

In Buddhism, the word “dharma” can have three different

meanings. The first meaning is the *universal nature of how things are*. At the time of the Buddha, each religious school had its own Dharma, or understanding of how things are. The second meaning of Dharma is the *teachings of the Buddha*. The third meaning is *phenomena*. Buddhism sees everything in terms of causes and affects. Mental activities, for example, are *dharmas*. When referring to the teachings of the Buddha, the word *Dharma* is capitalized. When referring to phenomena, it is not capitalized.

Dhammapada-aṭṭhakatha ("aṭṭhakathā" is Pāli for explanation, commentary)

Commentary to the Dhammapada.

Digha Nikāya

The "Long Discourses" (Pāli digha = "long"). It is the first of the five *nikāyas*, or collections, in the Sutta Pitaka of the Pāli Canon. Pāli scholar Joy Manné makes the argument that the *Digha Nikāya* was particularly intended to make converts (Bhikkhu Bodhi pointedly refers to this as "for the purpose of propaganda"!), with its high proportion of debates and devotional material.

Eight Precepts

These are lay precepts for people who want to practice more intensively. They are often observed on Uposatha Days. The additional precepts (to the Five Precepts) are: 1) refrain from eating after noon, 2) refraining from entertainment, wearing jewelry or using perfumes, and 3) sleeping on luxurious beds or over-sleeping.

fetters

Literally a "chain" that shackles one to the rounds of rebirth. The fetters are 1) self-identity view, 2) attachment to rites and rituals, 3) doubt, 4) sense desire, 5) ill will 6) desire for material existence, 7) desire for immaterial existence, 8) conceit, 9) restlessness, and 10)

ignorance.

Five Faculties

Also called the "Five Strengths" or the "Five Spiritual Faculties." They are 1) faith, 2) energy (vigor/diligence), 3) mindfulness, 4) concentration, and 5) wisdom.

Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Also called the Four Establishings of Mindfulness, and the Four Frames of Reference. The Four Foundations of Mindfulness are 1) the body, 2) feelings, or "feeling tones," 3) mental formations, and 4) mental phenomena.

jhāna (Pāli, Sanskrit: dhyāna)

"meditative absorption." The jhānas are states of high concentration. In the final formulation there are four "material" jhānas and four "immaterial" jhānas.

kōan (Japanese, also kung-an)

A kōan is a riddle or puzzle that Zen Buddhists use during meditation to overcome conceptual thinking in order to unravel a greater truth.

Majjhima Nikāya

The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha. It is the second of the five *nikāyas*, or collections, in the Sutta Pitaka of the Pāli Canon. It is generally believed to be the most important collection of discourses in the Canon. The *Majjhima Nikāya* corresponds to the *Madhyama Āgama* which survives in two Chinese translations. Fragments also exist in Sanskrit and Tibetan.

Māra (Pāli, Sanskrit)

Literally "bringer of death." Māra is a deity who embodies the ability of experience, especially sensory experience, to seduce and trap the mind, particularly to prevent the cessation of suffering.

nibbāna (Pāli, Sanskrit: nirvāṇa)

Nibbāna is one of the terms that is used to define the goal of the Buddhist path. It literally means "to extinguish," and means to extinguish the three flames of greed, hatred, and delusion.

non-returner (Pāli, Sanskrit: anāgāmi)

The third of four stages of awakening. A non-returner eliminates the fourth and fifth "fetters" – sense craving and ill-will – and will become an arahant with no more rebirths in the material realm.

once-returner (Pāli: sakadāgāmin, Sanskrit: sakṛdāmin)

The second of four stages of awakening. A once-returner has weakened the fourth and fifth "fetters" – sense craving and ill-will – and will become an arahant with no more than one more rebirth in the material realm.

Pāli Canon

The Pāli Canon is the collection of Buddhist texts preserved in the Pāli language. It consists of three *Pitakas*, or "baskets." These are the *Vinaya Pitaka* (the monastic code), the *Sutta Pitaka* (the discourses of the Buddha and his senior disciples), and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, a later work that is variously described as Buddhist philosophy, psychology, and metaphysics. The Abhidhamma Pitaka is unique to Theravada, or southern, Buddhism; the other collections have versions in the Chinese and Tibetan Canons.

parinibbāna (Pāli, Sanskrit: parinirvāṇa)

Literally "nibbāna after death." When the body of an arahant dies,

this frees the being from saṃsara, the rounds of rebirth.

Pātimokkha (Pāli, Sanskrit: Prātimokṣa)

Literally "towards liberation." It is the list of monastic rules in the Vinaya.

Saṇgha (Pāli, Sanskrit: saṃgha)

Literally "community." At the time of the Buddha the term Saṇgha referred either to the community of monastics (monks and nuns) or the noble Saṇgha, which is the community of people who are stream-enterers, once-returners, non-returners, and arahants.

Satipaṭṭhāna (Pāli)

The "Four Foundations of Mindfulness": (1) the body, (2), feelings/sensations, (3) mental formations (thoughts and emotions), and (4) *dharmas*, or phenomena.

Samaṇa (Pāli, Sanskrit: Śramaṇa)

A wandering ascetic.

Saṃyutta Nikāya

The Connected Discourses. It is the third of the five *nikāyas*, or collections, in the Sutta Pitaka of the Pāli Canon. *The Saṃyutta Nikāya* consists of fifty-six chapters, each governed by a unifying theme that binds together the Buddha's suttas or discourses.

Seven Factors of Awakening (enlightenment)

(1) Mindfulness, (2) investigation, (3) energy, (4) joy/rapture, (5) tranquility, (6) concentration, and (7) equanimity.

stream-entry (Pāli: sotāpanna, Sanskrit: srotāpanna)

The first of four stages of awakening. A stream-enterer overcomes the first three "fetters" – self view, attachment to rites and rituals and skeptical doubt – and will become an arahant in no more than seven lifetimes with no rebirths in the lower realms.

sutta (Pāli, Sanskrit: sutra)

A discourse of the Buddha or one of his disciples. The Pāli word "sutta" refers specifically to the Pāli Canon. The words "sutta" and the Sanskrit form "sutra" literally mean "thread," and are related to the English word "suture."

Tathāgata (Pāli, Sanskrit)

A word the Buddha used when referring to himself. It's literal meaning is ambiguous. It can mean either "thus gone" (tathā-gata) or "thus come" (tathā-āgata). It is probably intentionally ambiguous, meaning that the Buddha, having attained a final awakening, was beyond all comings and goings.

Upāsaka (masculine), **Upāsikā** (feminine) (Pāli, Sanskrit)

Literally "attendant." A lay follower of the Buddha, one who has taken and keeps the Five Precepts.

Uposatha (Pāli, Sanskrit: Upavasatha)

Traditionally held on the new moon and full moon days of the lunar month. This is the day when monastics gather to recite the Pātimokkha (monastic rules) and confess any transgressions. Lay people observe either the Five Precepts or, if they spend the day at a temple or monastery, the Eight Precepts.

Visuddhimagga (Pāli)

Literally, *The Path of Purification*. *The Visuddhimagga* is a Theravada commentarial work attributed to the monk Buddhaghosa, who

formulated it in Sri Lanka in the fifth century CE.

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